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# Challenges to Democratic Practices and Discourses in the European Parliament: Feminist Perspectives on the Politics of Political Groups

**Johanna Kantola [1] and Emanuela Lombardo[2,*]**

**Abstract.** The European Parliament is now host to a significant number of politicians from radical right populist parties, leaving the Parliament to deal with illiberal elements within its structures. At the heart of the European Union's democratic values is a commitment to gender equality, a commitment hotly contested by illiberal actors and radical right populists. The research objective of this article is to use feminist political theories of democracy to understand the challenges and possibilities for democracy in the European Parliament. This overarching research objective is approached through studying political groups' discourses and practices of democracy and equality. A qualitative analysis of parliamentary debates and interviews with European Parliament Members and staff in the 2014–2019 and 2019–2024 legislatures makes it possible to identify both antagonistic dynamics targeting gender and human rights and agonistic deliberation which creates opportunities for improving democratic practices.

## Introduction

The European Parliament (EP) has long been regarded as the most democratic of European Union (EU) institutions. However, the EP is now host to a significant number of politicians from radical right populist parties, who have either joined established political groups or have formed new ones, leaving the Parliament to deal with illiberal elements within its structures. At the heart of the EU's democratic values is a commitment to gender equality, a commitment hotly contested by illiberal actors and radical right populists. They are implacably opposed to the very category of gender and any form of

[1]*Gender Studies, Faculty of Social Sciences, Tampere University, Finland*
[2]*Department of Political Science and Administration and Institute of Feminist Research, Madrid Complutense University, Spain*
*johanna.kantola@uta.fi

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challenge to traditional gender norms and roles. The rights of sexual minorities, trans rights, tools for advancing gender equality, and equal participation rights, such as quotas or gender mainstreaming, are but some examples of key gender equality issues that they vehemently oppose. One recent analysis indicates that after the 2019 EP elections, the number of the Members of European Parliament (MEPs) who oppose gender equality and women's rights had risen to over 30 percent (around 210 out of 705 MEPs)—essentially doubling in comparison to the previous legislature (Zacharenko 2020).

The research objective of this article is to use feminist political theories of democracy to understand the challenges and possibilities for democracy in the EP. This overarching research objective is approached through studying political groups' discourses and practices of democracy and equality. Feminist theories of democracy stress the inclusion and participation of nonhegemonic subjectivities (Fraser 1990; Young 1990), and the antagonism that hampers democratic debate and the agonism that carves out space for it (Mouffe 1999, 2005). We argue that, assessed through two dimensions: (i) undermining inclusiveness and participation and (ii) generating antagonistic dynamics, there are democratic challenges in discourses and practices, targeting gender, human rights, and the rule of law, triggered by the presence of radical right parties in the EP. However, there are also elements of agonistic deliberation, which create opportunities for improving democratic practices.

The focus of our analysis is, first, not just the radical right, but all the EP's political groups. Strengthening democratic practices, which foster inclusion and participation, and creating space for agonistic debates are pertinent to all political parties. While gender and politics, and EU scholarship, often treat the EP as one unit, its political groups illustrate the diversity of practices and discourses within the Parliament, which also shines a more revealing light on democratic challenges and gender. Second, our focus is on discourses and practices of democracy and equality. We are attentive to how political groups construct democracy (discourses) and how they enact democracy (practices, especially in relation to gender equality). Our research questions are: (i) How is democracy discursively constructed by and enacted in the practices of political groups? And (ii) How is democracy challenged or enabled by political groups in relation to gender equality? Our extensive research material includes interviews with MEPs and staff from different political groups in the parliament ($n = 123$), plenary debates on contentious issues of gender, sexuality, and migration, and a selection of debates about democracy in the EU between 2014–2019 and 2019–2024 ($n = 47$).

## Feminist Theories of Democracy in Times of Radical Right Populism

Feminist theories of democracy raise important issues about the quality of democracy. Inclusiveness and participation of nonhegemonic subjects, and

the politicization that acknowledges the other not as an enemy, but rather as a political opponent with whom to diverge from in a respectful way, have been central to the interface between feminism and democracy. Feminist political theories of participation and conflict, which we discuss below, argue that challenges to democracy include more than breaches to the rule of law, also entailing parliamentary practices that promote the exclusion of marginalized groups, and treat the other as an enemy.

Feminist political theory is the main reference to ground our research objective of addressing challenges and opportunities for democracy in the EP. Feminist political theorists have engaged with democratic theory by demanding a deeper quality of democracy in terms of inclusiveness, parity democracy, justice, responsiveness, accountability, and equal participation (Fraser 1990; Pateman 1970; Phillips 1991; Rodríguez and Rubio 2009; Young 1990). We also draw on insights from feminist institutionalist scholars theorizing the genderedness of both formal institutions in the dimensions of policy analysis, law, and codified rules and informal institutions in the less visible, often unwritten, customary norms, such as everyday parliamentary and party practices that reward and sanction the behavior of different genders differently (Waylen and Chappell 2013).

To address challenges and opportunities to democracy and equality in the EP, we find two approaches to democratic theory particularly insightful, albeit with one being more explicitly feminist than the other. They both address key processes that occur in parliament: deliberation and contestation. First, feminist theorists have conceptualized participatory forms of democracy that place inclusion at the core. Both Iris Marion Young and Nancy Fraser have reflected on the possibilities for inclusion and participation in deliberative democratic processes in the public sphere, in structurally unequal societies that are biased in favor of privileged groups. Young (1990, 119) argues that participatory democracy should promote inclusion "of a heterogeneous public, in which persons stand forth with their differences acknowledged and respected, though perhaps not completely understood." Fraser (1990) similarly contends that in stratified societies in which the public sphere enhances domination from hegemonic groups, it is of utmost importance to include in public deliberations the perspectives of subaltern subjects that tend to be excluded in formal and informal ways. Such inclusive discourse opens up the potential for the privileges of dominant social groups to be challenged. In line with these theories, parliamentary discourses and practices that exclude and disrespect marginalized groups would show challenges to democratic practices and discourses.

Feminist participatory theories of democracy defend democratic participation of people in public discussion and decision-making on educative grounds. Dialogue, argument, and decision-making require democratic practices, and through these, citizens (MEPs in our case), learn to deliberate and participate in inclusive and respectful ways. Such practices are needed to

permeate all areas, from the domestic sphere to the workplace and politics, for educating citizens in democratic life (Pateman 1970, 41) and promoting inclusion (Young 1990, 157). Democratic practices within parliaments should be gender-sensitive and enact parity democracy by stripping away entrenched gendered and racialized barriers to participation (Childs and Palmieri 2022). Alternatively, these democratic practices may become challenging through questioning the legitimacy of a gender equality perspective to inclusive practices and policies.

While gender and other inequalities are central to the aforementioned theory of participatory democracy, they are less prominent in the second, conflict-orientated theory of democracy that we suggest provides fertile ground for understanding the current state of democracy in the EP: Chantal Mouffe's radical theory of democracy. Mouffe (2005, 1999) argues that since conflict and antagonism are inherent elements of "the political," the task of democratic politics is not to eliminate conflicting dimensions, but to create institutions and practices that will transform "antagonism" into "agonism." This means that, while politics inevitably implies a construction of "us" versus "them," democratic politics can transform antagonistic relationships between "enemies" into agonistic relationships between "adversaries." For Mouffe, the contrast between antagonism and agonism is that the latter characterizes politics as the struggle about conflicting ideas but where adversaries' rights of expression are recognized as legitimate. The feminist potential of agonistic struggles lies in the possibility to create a safe space for debating gender equality and to include new equality issues on the agenda.

Mouffe defends the agonistic model of democracy on the basis that it will provoke a multiplicity of voices in pluralist societies. She suggests that the EU has been an example of new institutions transforming antagonisms between former enemies after World War II, into an agonism of legitimate adversaries (Mouffe 2012, 633). In the EU, ongoing political confrontation remains, but is institutionally channeled through participation in a common project that allows for the recognition of different actors as legitimate and consensual. Mouffe (2019) suggests there is a possibility of agonistic (thus democratic) negotiation between right populist and progressive parties in Europe. This would occur if progressive parties recognize the "democratic nucleus" of demands made by right parties to represent the people in the face of "oligarchization" and the increasing inequality and pauperization that neoliberalism has provoked. By responding to these demands, in ways that deepen democratic values of social justice and equality rather than through the restriction of rights that populism advocates, right-wing populism could be evaporated.

In addition to identifying challenges to democracy, feminist perspectives contribute to identifying practices for enhancing gender-inclusive parliaments and safe spaces for agonistic deliberation, which provide opportunities to democracy. These are particularly pertinent in polarized and populist times to

avoid offensive and harmful speech, and attitudes that do not promote inclusive participation. Examples include codified rules on gender-balanced representation, balanced speaking time, gender mainstreaming provisions, and rules against sexual harassment and hateful speech. Further practices to promote inclusive participation include safe spaces for deliberation (Martínez-Palacios 2018), training in respectful interventions, sanctioning of offensive and harmful speech. Such practices can improve democracy in the EP in inclusive and agonistic ways.

## The European Parliament and Challenges to Democracy and Equality

The founding treaties of the EU established the centrality of democracy and related values to the union (Article 2 of the Treaty on European Union, TEU). The Treaties also established a sanctioning mechanism against states that engaged in "serious and persistent breach" of the Union's democratic values (Article 7 of the TEU) (Kelemen 2020, 481). Recent developments in Europe where democracy has been challenged at the Member State level have called heightened attention to these issues. The European Commission has initiated proceedings against Poland and Hungary (Kelemen 2020, 481; Morijn 2019, 618) and the EP has reacted against democratic backsliding in Malta and Romania too, voiced concern about the position of investigative journalists in Europe, and demanded protection of the EU budget in the Czech Republic (Morijn 2019, 618). The EP has also pushed for political conditionality and rule of law in the EU's COVID-19 response (the so-called Recovery and Resilience Facility package).

Critical commentators have also noted that despite its attempts to uphold and promote democracy, the EU's position is paradoxical. Namely, it also supports "the survival of authoritarian member governments," which Kelemen (2020, 482) describes as "authoritarian equilibrium." He argues that the EU has an "underdeveloped system of party politics and its ingrained reluctance to interfere in the political affairs of its member states help shield national autocrats from EU intervention" (Kelemen 2020, 483). With EU funding, the EU supports authoritarian governments while lacking political will to invoke the mechanisms to ensure its funding is suspended if they breach the core values and democratic practices (Kelemen 2020, 483–85).

Questions about democracy in the EP commonly address how it has matured as a parliament from its origins as an assembly (Ripoll Servent 2018). Many scholars argue that elections alone do not make the EP democratic, but that there is a need to analyze how it functions as a democratic body in terms of its actors and processes (Ahrens, Elomäki, and Kantola, forthcoming). The political groups of the EP become key actors to the functioning of democracy within the Parliament and party political competition between them is crucial

**Table 1.** European Parliament's political groups in the eighth (2014–2019) and the ninth parliaments (2019–2024)

| Political group (in the order of size in the ninth) | Full name | Number of MEPs—eighth | Percentage of women MEPs—eighth | Number of MEPs—ninth | Percentage of women MEPs—ninth |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| EPP | Group of the European People's Party (Christian Democrats) | 216 | 31 | 187 | 32 |
| S&D | Group of the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats in the European Parliament | 185 | 46 | 145 | 43 |
| Renew (ALDE, eighth) | Renew Europe Group (Group of the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe) | (69) | (39) | 98 | 41 |
| ID (ENF, eighth) | Identity and Democracy Group (Europe of Nations and Freedom Group) | (36) | (31) | 75 | 39 |
| Greens/EFA | Group of the Greens/ European Free Alliance | 52 | 42 | 69 | 51 |
| ECR | European Conservatives and Reformists Group | 77 | 21 | 62 | 31 |
| GUE/NGL | Confederal Group of the European United Left/ Nordic Green Left | 52 | 50 | 39 | 44 |
| (EFDD, eighth) | (Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy Group) | (42) | (38) | NA | NA |

*Note:* NA, Not applicable.

for realization of democratic politics (Hix et al. 2007). Political groups are alliances of national party delegations, where national political parties and MEPs come together to shape the EP's policy-making processes (Corbett et al. 2016; Ripoll Servent 2018). They present hugely varied political and normative positions on most policy issues, including those related to gender (Ahrens, Elomäki, and Kantola, forthcoming). Table 1 presents an overview of the eight political groups in the so-called eighth Parliament for the legislative turn 2014–2019 and the seven political groups in the ninth Parliament for the legislative turn 2019–2024.

Table 1 shows how the European Parliamentary Party (EPP) and Socialists and Democrats in the European Parliament (S&D) are the biggest groups followed by the liberals (Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe [ALDE]/ Renew). Whilst the Greens/European Free Alliance (EFA) made significant gains in the 2019 elections, so did the radical right populists. After the changes due to Brexit, which in 2020 led British MEPs to leave their seats, the radical

right populist Identity and Democracy (ID) group became the fourth biggest group in the parliament. The European Conservatives and Reformists Group (ECR) was a more moderate right populist group in the eighth Parliament but with Brexit and the dominance of the Polish Law and Justice Party in the ninth, it is becoming increasingly radical right populist.

Paying attention to the contemporary context of radical right populism and illiberal politics in Europe, Kelemen (2020) and Morijn (2019) argue the current system incentivizes the EP's political groups to protect the illiberal national elements within them. Mainstream parties within the EP rely on them to enhance their bargaining power in an environment where political groups compete in size and influence for parliamentary positions and for votes (Kelemen 2020, 484). This explained the position that Fidesz occupied within the EPP Europarty, and the EPP political group within the EP until 2021. The S&D political group similarly struggled with its Romanian and Bulgarian delegations, indicating the existence of antidemocratic forces within the political left too (Zacharenko 2020, 17). Populist politics then, from left and right, accentuates questions about the possibilities for democratic politics within the EP and the role of political groups in it.

Importantly, less scholarly attention has been paid to the democratic or nondemocratic practices in relation to decision-making within the political groups, such as transparency, inclusion of diverse voices, public deliberation, and participatory practices, all at the heart of feminist democratic theories (Ahrens, Elomäki, and Kantola, forthcoming). Yet, such practices shape interactions and power hierarchies between the groups and they also influence policy outcomes. Democratic practices are important to political decision-making within political groups, where the divergent views and interests of national political parties are consolidated into a policy line of the transnational political group (Ahrens, Elomäki, and Kantola, forthcoming). In line with feminist institutionalism, analyzing democratic practices requires paying attention to both formal and informal practices as well as their interactions (Waylen and Chappell 2013). Formal and informal practices within the groups in relation to the allocation of leadership positions, policy-formation processes, deliberation and expression of dissent, and representation have a significant impact on policy outcomes as well as the groups' ability to channel citizens' interests in EP's decision-making (Ahrens, Elomäki, and Kantola, forthcoming).

Feminist scholarship on democracy and the EP has made important contributions, which could be more fully integrated to mainstream debates. From a feminist perspective, the key focus when studying democracy and the EP has been on the numbers of women elected, and the gender-equality policies enacted (Abels 2019; Ahrens and Rolandsen Agustin 2019). Table 1 shows that women's political representation ranges from over 50 percent in the Greens/EFA, to over 40 percent in the S&D, Confederal Group of the European United Left/Nordic Green Left (GUE/NGL), and Renew. The ID

has nearly 40 percent women, which can be considered as high percentage for a radical right populist group. The lowest representation of women is in the conservative EPP and the radical right populist ECR, just over 30 percent.

From a gender perspective too, populism and illiberal politics pose fundamental challenges to democracy and equality within the EP. The demonstrable tension between the kind of illiberal politics noted above and the EU values listed in Article 2 (TEU)—pluralism, nondiscrimination, tolerance, justice, solidarity, and equality between women and men—has been exposed by a number of texts showing how illiberal politics takes a form of actively opposing these values and gender equality (Roggeband and Krizsan 2018; Verloo 2018). The so-called "anti-gender" movements, which have developed the notion of gender equality as a harmful and biased "gender ideology," play an active part in delegitimizing gender and gender equality in Europe (Kuhar and Paternotte 2017). Their ideas are articulated in direct and indirect strategies of opposing gender equality in the EP too (Kantola and Lombardo 2020). Here feminist scholarship contributes the focus on discourses, namely the power of these discursively articulated strategies in making the EP a more hostile context than before for advancing gender equality.

In sum, there is a need to not only study the EP as a whole but also to understand the differences between its political actors, the political groups. Differentiating such analyses by the political groups reveals the more nuanced political dynamics within the Parliament on the challenges and opportunities for democracy in terms of political groups' discourses and practices.

## Methodology, Methods, and Research Material

This research explores how democracy is addressed in the discourse, and enacted in the practices of political groups in the EP from feminist perspectives. We apply qualitative methods that include content analysis of plenary debates and interviews. While text analysis allows us to observe how democracy is addressed in discourses, interviews enable us to scrutinize both discourses and practices of democracy and equality of political groups through MEPs and staff.

Our interview data consist of 123 interviews with MEPs and staff conducted over the course of the eighth and ninth Parliaments in Brussels. The interviews formed part of a larger study about the gendered practices and policies of the EP's political groups carried out by members of the research project. Interviewees included MEPs, their assistants, political group staff, and parliamentary staff, forming a representative sample of all political groups and ensuring a diversity of Member States, genders, and seniority. Interviews were semi-structured and followed an interview guide with questions about the EP's political groups' practices (including democratic decision-making), gender equality practices, leadership, MEP/staff lives and relationship with the

political group, relations with and views about other political groups, behavior and conduct, and policy-making practices especially in relation to equality policies. They were recorded, transcribed, and anonymized.

The interviews were coded by the members of the research project using Atlas.ti. Codes were developed deductively as well as inductively over several periodic team meetings, and covered both topical and theoretical codes; for example, political group identity, democratic practices of the political groups, and populism. To ensure intercoder reliability, and to offset the risk of inconsistent interpretation, team members coded two interviews alternately before reporting important aspects in a research diary that was accessible to everyone, to enable rigorous comparison of the way the codes had been used throughout. As a general rule, team members were encouraged to use codes as extensively as possible to secure full coverage of important empirical material. Because of the expansive coding process, the codes "democracy" and "democratic practices" (in political groups and in the EP) included less material of relevance for the research questions in this article. Subsequently, we narrowed the material down into two ways. First, we created and analyzed Atlas.ti reports on the co-occurrence of the codes democracy and populism, and democratic practices and populism. Second, we searched for the word democra* to capture democracy and democratic in interviewees' speech. In particular, these handpicked citations from interviewees' speech about democracy included answers to the first interview questions about democratic decision-making practices in political groups. Using these Atlas.ti reports and handpicked citations, we analyzed and compared the interview material in an iterative process to isolate the discursive constructions about democratic practices in the political groups.

Using interviews alone would have given undue weight to privately expressed views. In addition, it would have given us inadequate material to analyze the gendered dimensions of the democratic practices and backsliding. Hence, we complemented the interview material by focusing on plenary debates. First, we reviewed all EP parliamentary debates on gender for the 2014–2019 parliamentary term and the 2019–2024 term until the first two months of 2020. In this case, we conducted an online search of all plenary debates, and using the keywords "gender," "women," "sex," "sexuality," "lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, and intersex (LGBTI)," and "gender equality" we identified a total of 100 plenary debates for the 2014–2019 parliamentary term and seven for new legislative term which started in 2019. The range of topics illustrates the relevance of gender to a wide variety of issues, including gender in education, forced marriage, LGTBI rights, women entrepreneurship, taxation, external relations, trade agreements, and media. Second, we identified plenary debates on democracy in the EU and European Member States in the selected period. Using the keywords, "democracy," "backlash," "breaches," "rule of law" on their own and in conjunction with "gender," "gender

equality," "women," "sex," "sexuality," "LGBTI," we were able to identify nineteen debates.

We selected thirty-five debates on gender and twelve on democracy for closer analysis. The selection was informed by a purposive sampling of those that offered variety and richness in the interpretations of democracy and gender equality by EP political groups. Purposive sampling has the aim of intentionally selecting debates about gender equality within the selected time frame. This type of qualitative sampling is not aimed at determining incidence and prevalence, but the interpretative dimensions (Luborsky and Rubinstein 1995) of the challenges to democracy and equality in parliamentary interventions. We then analyzed the speeches of MEPs from different political groups and used feminist perspectives to distill the meanings of their discourses about democracy. The research material saturated quickly. This means that the patterns encountered tended to be similar across the debates—and were not as dependent on the topic as one might have expected. In other words, certain anti-gender and anti-democracy discourses reappeared and were articulated in similar ways across debates.

In the analysis sections that follow, we focus first on the constructions of democracy in political group discourses, illustrating the range from liberal to illiberal ones. Second, we consider challenges to democracy from the point of view of gender equality policy. Third, we are attentive to the democratic practices of the political groups, once again applying the concepts of inclusion and agonism to assess their significance.

## Political Struggle over Democracy in the Discourses of Political Groups

This section is attentive to how political groups and their MEPs construct democracy. We show that the ways in which democracy is discursively constructed, and how different aspects of democracy are valued, serves to illustrate their intent to protect, develop, or curtail it. The constructions ranged from those consistent with inclusive feminist perspectives, namely progressive and liberal groups who connected democracy to defending the rule of law and fundamental rights, to the radical right populists, who bend some liberal rights against others to create antagonism and conflict.

In the plenary debates, liberal, green, and left politicians defended the rule of law and fundamental rights. In the debate on The Rule of Law in Malta, after the revelations around the murder of Daphne Caruana (CRE 17/12/2019-2), a woman journalist who investigated corruption, democracy was related to the defense of the rule of law. Thus, we found voices suggesting: "this is an issue of taking political responsibility for the health of the democratic rule of law in the European Union" (Sophia in't Veld, Renew group) as well as those that called for the eradication of "systematic corruption" and "media

freedom" (Tineke Strik, Verts/ALE). In debates concerning breaches of the rule of law in Hungary and Poland that related to the curtailing the independence of the judiciary, media pluralism, minority rights, academic freedom, and corruption, MEPs from S&D demanded new mechanisms from European institutions to safeguard democracy. These included a "framework for fundamental rights, democracy and rule of law" that "periodically revises compliances of the principles proclaimed in EU law and the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union" (Juan Fernando López, The ongoing threat for the Rule of law in Poland CRE 11/2/2020-15), as well as calls to "tie the extent of the country's compliance with the rule of law to EU funds" (Sylwia Spurek, "Ongoing hearings under article 7(1) of the TEU regarding Hungary" CRE 15/1/2020-16). These discourses reveal how progressive groups promote inclusive and agonistic constructions of democracy within the framework of respect for the rule of law.

One of our key findings is that radical right populists talk a lot about democracy as a means to construct their opponents as undemocratic, but at the same time they contest its inclusive principles. In the citation below, a male MEP from the Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy Group (EFDD) argued that the way other political groups use the term "populism" is antidemocratic because it is a means for "shutting up" populists:

> Yeah because basically, anything that you say that I don't want you to say, even though all of the people want it, you're just populist. We've had a referendum and it's proven that the people want us to leave the EU and it's populist. Bonkers, isn't it? It's a way of shutting down arguments without having to argue too much. (EFDD MEP M 290119_4)

This "self-victimization" strategy (Kantola and Lombardo 2020) aims at "shifting the blame" (Wodak 2015, 67) on radical right populists' opponents, accusing them and EU institutions of being undemocratic. This gives radical right populists the space to neutralize opponents' critiques of their own antidemocratic actions.

This interview illustrates Mouffe's "antagonistic" approach in an argument presenting the EU as undemocratic:

> *We want to destroy* the whole of Europe, the European Union, not Europe but we want to destroy the European Union, not just leave it, we want to destroy it, we think it's evil, we think it's like the Nazi party, or like the Communist party. It's out to create a dictatorship of bureaucrats to rule Europe, and that it already has done. (EFDD MEP M 290119_3)

While referring to the EU in such destructive terms, right populists construct themselves as champions of democracy: "The name is very central. . . . If you said to me, 'Summarise in three or four words what you believe in', it would be freedom and democracy" (EFDD Group Staff M 190319). In their

discourses, populism and democracy are treated as synonyms, because populist leaders ipso facto regard themselves as more able to represent the needs of the people than traditional parties:

> For me, someone who's a populist is someone who fights for his people, who's taking into account what the people want. And this is the definition of democracy. So what's wrong with it? Maybe they should ask themselves why they are disconnected with the people they are supposed to represent. (Europe of Nations and Freedom Group [ENF] Staff M 260419)

> I have quite some influence (in the committee) in representing to my opponents in a physical way someone who is far away from their minds . . . They don't know these people. They think they are some strange rats in holes and all of a sudden in their committee there is someone speaking the language of these rats and out of these holes. (ID MEP M 120320)

These excerpts can be read through Mouffe's (2019) argument that for responding to right populist challenges to democracy one must recognize the "democratic nucleus" of their arguments. According to Mouffe, traditional center and progressive parties in Europe did not respond adequately to the 2008 financial crisis. The neoliberal strategies of shoring up financial institutions, whilst simultaneously pursuing fiscal policies of austerity, stirred the discontent of those afflicted by pauperization and who perceived their situation as a globalist intrusion into national sovereignty. Right populist parties have based their discourse on the "recovery of democracy" from technocrats and oligarchs to the people, which allows them to present themselves as defenders of democracy. Nonetheless, the problematic paradox of this discourse, argues Mouffe (2019), is that right populist parties use the language of "democratic recovery" as a means to restrict the democratic rights of others.

This paradox is illustrated in EP debates on the democratic transgressions of the governments of Hungary and Poland. While democratic backsliding is present in other Member States, the Hungarian government is a paradigmatic case of de-democratization. In the EP debate, "The situation in Hungary" (CRE 11/09/2018), Judith Sargentini (Greens/EFA) called on the EP to take action against Orbán's government for breaching the rule of law, democracy, and human rights in policies that violated the EU's values. While progressive and liberal groups spoke in defense of the rule of law, Orbán received support from the radical right populist groups ECR, EFDD, and ENF who blamed their opponents (EU institutions, progressive parties) as antidemocratic (Branislav Škripek, ECR) and the Sargentini report as ". . . another instalment of an attack on their [Hungarian] democratically elected governments" (Ryszard Antoni Legutko, ECR). This rhetoric shifted the focus away from the violations of democracy and human rights that gave rise to the report to the

support of national sovereignty from EU and foreign lobbies which radical right populists defend from the supposedly antidemocratic report on breaches to the rule of law presented by their political opponents. The argument made by the EFDD through Nigel Farage is that "they are just updating the Brezhnev doctrine of limited sovereignty." This is echoed by ENF groups as follows: "... you, dearest Orbán, are a hero in this Parliament, a hero fighting for freedom and sovereignty of its people against the European Soviet Union. The Hungarian people is under the attack of this Europe, slave of lobbies, banks, and financers like Soros" (Mara Bizzotto, ENF).

These radical right populist speeches show how they bend democracy to different meanings, covering violations of human and democratic rights, instrumentally using some liberal rights against others. Bending women's rights with nativist defenses of protecting "our" women from migrants and Muslims have been commonplace in radical right populist speeches during several debates on gender equality (Kantola and Lombardo 2020). For example, in "The situation of women refugees and asylum seekers in the EU" (CRE 08/03/2016–5) Margot Parker (EFDD) claims:

> The EU has opened the door to millions of people from countries and cultures that treat women as second-class citizens and LGBTI people even worse. Is it any wonder that we see the shocking scenes in Cologne and Sweden with women being sexually assaulted and humiliated? For the safety of *our own women*, and for the welfare of those seeking refuge, we must scrap these EU policies...

In sum, while progressive and liberal groups construct democracy in relation to inclusion and the rule of law, radical right populists use strategies to recover elements of democracy that people can connect with, but to promote an illiberal project of curtailing democratic rights.

## Gendered Democratic Challenges in Political Groups

Drawing on feminist theorizing of democracy we consider how privileging antagonism over agonism poses democratic challenges (Mouffe 2019). This section explores how gender becomes antagonistic in radical right populist speech and analyses the ways in which debating gender equality influences the broader work of political groups.

One interviewee, a woman MEP from the EPP, noted that gender equality is debated every week in plenaries (EPP MEP F 100320). This is reflected in the large sample of plenary debates on gender we identified. Gender equality is a live topic in the EP and the chances for proponents and opponents to express and formulate their views on gender in the plenaries are many. The views expressed are not just words, as any discourse analysis would illustrate what is said can have myriad effects in defining political realities. The woman

MEP from the EPP noted how she needs to cooperate with the more conservative MEPs in her group on many other policy issues, but their conservative views on women's rights make it "difficult" for her (EPP MEP F 100320). Indeed, gender is more than a side topic for radical right populists, it is at the heart of their political work in not only defining the values they speak for, but also in constructing their opponents and "enemies" (Köttig, Bitzan, and Pető 2017).

Most radical right populist MEPs in our interviews, however, argued that gender is a nonissue and does not matter: "... in the majority I think we don't have any of these kinds of questions on the table about equality. Because for us it doesn't really matter whether you are a man or a woman for some position" (ID MEP M 130320). The male MEP from the radical right populist ID continues to say that gender equality measures—especially quotas—are "ridiculous." The citation shows resistance against gender, ridiculing gender equality policies being a form of it (Kantola and Lombardo 2020), and exposes the fundamental contradiction in their rhetoric: gender equality is and should be a nonissue, aside from the considerable time they spend opposing it.

This opposition can be seen in the increased polarization around gender in the plenaries, which hampers democracy in the EP. Gender and sexuality have become key axes of polarization with little dialogue and increased levels of antagonism. Radical right groups attack the EU's democratic rights through "direct opposition against gender equality" (Kantola and Lombardo 2020) in plenary debates across a variety of gender issues.

Some opposition strategies are indirect. They will often explicitly address some other target such as the EU, and in so doing they indirectly attack gender equality (Kantola and Lombardo 2020). Examples of this opposition are in the debate "Public discrimination and hate speech against LGBTI people, including LGBTI free zones" (CRE 26/11/2019-15), which concerned the Polish authorities' violation of EU antidiscrimination laws, by issuing public statements against LGBTI people such as "LGBTI-free zones" in several towns. There, radical right political groups such as the ID and some parts of the ECR strategically use "reversal of the meaning" of the term "hate" to steer the debate to claim that in Poland heterosexual men are being attacked. Thus we find an MEP from the ID stating "the impression we speak about hate on Poland" and claiming "I don't agree that you attack Poland, its tradition and its pride" (Maximilian Krah, ID). Another MEP from the ECR employed "self-victimization" and "blame shifting," by putting hate crimes against vulnerable groups such as LGBTI on the same level as spurious (unsupported by data) hate against heterosexual men, and accusing the left of only addressing some hate and not others: "... what has the left to say about the generalized male criminalization in Europe?" (Jorge Buxadé, ECR).

Oppositional discourse against gender equality often recurs to what radical right populists term "gender ideology." This is a shorthand for the view that

gender equality is a dangerous and elitist ideology that challenges traditional family values based on heteronormative relations, undermines conventional domestic roles to women and public roles to men, and seeks the pernicious expansion of sexual and reproductive rights (Kantola and Lombardo 2020; Kuhar and Paternotte 2017). Right populists claim to represent "the people" against "this gender nonsense" (Beatrix von Storch, EFDD, debate on three gender issues), as radical right speakers make clear in the debate "Empowering girls through education in the EU" (CRE 08/09/2015-19): "People don't agree with this pressure to introduce gender ideology into our families, schools and societies. Millions of people in Europe say no, no in France, Italy, Croatia, Slovakia" (Branislav Škripek, ECR).

In this interview, a male EFDD MEP delegitimizes and denies gender equality as an issue:

> R: No, we don't believe in gender equality at all. It doesn't matter what your gender is. It's what you've got between your ears. It's whether you are able or not, it's nothing to do with your sex.
>
> I: But if there was some kind of, something like, FGM, that's a gendered thing that's happening in society so, if you wanted to pursue something like that, how would you do it?
>
> R: You know what, I don't necessarily believe that, FGM is something that is . . . some primitive societies do this. Quite frankly it's their business, it's not really our business. (EFDD MEP M 290119_3)

This discourse clearly challenges democracy by not respecting the EU's value of gender equality and by delegitimizing related policies.

Radical right populists actively pursue practices that divert and obstruct, such as using blue-card questions in plenaries in antagonistic ways. Blue-card interventions are intended to make debates livelier by allowing MEPs to pose direct questions to the speaker. However, radical right populists use them strategically to divert attention from democracy and gender equality by attacking women's rights through hateful speech, a practice not detected for other groups. Hateful speech radical right populists poses problems for democracy because it is not "only words" but also the transmission of wider messages that legitimate intimidation, discrimination, and subordination toward the targeted people (Mackinnon 1996). Its primary role, however, is to silence the contender by enacting the power of one social group over another, hence impeding agonistic dialogue. Hateful speech practices expose the limitations of the EP's attempts to address the problem that radical right populist groups create for democracy and equality. A case in point was the EU's response to the overtly misogynistic blue-card comment by radical right populist Janusz Korwin-Mikke who stated that (NI, P8_CRE-REV(2017)03-01(19): "Of course women must earn less than men because they are weaker, they are

smaller, they are less intelligent, and they must earn less. That is all." Although the EP imposed sanctions on the Polish MEP for a hate comment that intimidated and offended women MEPs, the European Court of Justice annulled the sanction in 2018, citing a defense of his right to speak "in the exercise of his parliamentary functions." This episode reveals that it is not only hateful speech, but also the formal norms allowing its expression, which are problematic for democracy in the EP.

From the point of view of democratic challenges concerning gender equality, it is not just radical right populism, but also gender conservatism within mainstream groups such as the EPP that is a central issue (Kelemen 2020). One male MEP from the EPP explained how conservative leadership in a group—which has conservative members and, albeit fewer, "progressive" ones—makes a difference. In the important preparatory meetings, he said the most conservative members are "vocal" and "the more progressive members either being less vocal or being absent because of other activities." He concludes the group has shifted further toward conservatism over the years (EPP MEP M 220319). This is significant as the position and views of the EPP, the biggest group in the EP since 1999, are fundamental to the fate of gender equality policies (Elomäki forthcoming).

## Democratic Practices of the Political Groups

We now turn to the practices of the political groups in actually promoting democracy in their own political work within the EP. These relate directly to inclusion and participation of nonhegemonic subjects. We discuss three main findings below: (i) in formal practices, there is progress in the EP's rules about gender inclusiveness, whilst assessing the political groups' practices on gender parity show differences; (ii) in informal practices, all political groups share problems in inclusiveness of their decision-making processes because they limited the space for deliberations through decision-making to small circles, which can exclude women, thus curtailing internal democracy. This shows the need for all groups to debate democracy not only in relation to Member States but also in relation to their own parliamentary practices; and finally, (iii) a polarized EP poses democratic dilemmas of inclusion and agonism, as the practices of radical right populist nonengagement and their containment through *cordon sanitaire* show.

### Formally Democratic and Equal in Practice

The democratic character of formal practices within political groups is assessed here in relation to the inclusion of women. Formal practices include, for instance, rules for selecting representatives for different leadership positions, such as group leaders, committee chairs, or coordinators, attending group meetings to discuss policy lines, gender parity, and values of the groups

(Ahrens, Elomäki, and Kantola, forthcoming). The work of political groups is formally guided by their group statutes and the parliamentary rules of procedure (see Bressanelli, forthcoming).

The EP changed its rules of procedure in 2019, showing attempts to democratize the Parliament and strive toward a more agonistic and gender-inclusive environment. The amended Corbett report of the EP Rules of Procedure (P8 TA(2019)0046), prepared by an S&D MEP and adopted in plenary January 31, 2019, not only introduced a new Rule (228a) on gender mainstreaming and gender action plans for the EP, but it also contained provisions on hate speech and harassment practices. Particularly important for the EP's agonistic and inclusive democracy is the rule proscribing MEPs against such practices. MEPs, it argues, "shall not resort to offensive language such as 'defamatory language,' 'hate speech,' and incitement to discrimination based, in particular, on any ground referred to in Article 21" (11.3c), and in addition, that MEPs "shall refrain from any type of psychological or sexual harassment" and "respect the Code of appropriate behaviour for Members of the European Parliament" (11.3e). The rules of procedure also make some progress toward parity democracy by stating that "... the diversity of Parliament must be reflected in the composition of the bureau of each committee; it shall not be permissible to have an all-male or all-female bureau" (204.1). The Corbett report thus illustrates attempts to democratize the EP in agonistic, gender-sensitive ways by changing existing rules of proceeding.

Despite these changes, the EP appears polarized concerning the practices for inclusion of women: it is the concern of some political groups—left, green, and liberal—but less so for the conservative and the radical right populist groups. Table 1 illustrated the differences in the numbers of women MEPs in the political groups showing how the conservative EPP and the conservative and radical right populist ECR lag behind the other groups. In terms of formal practices for advancing gender equality within the groups, the green/left groups have developed a number of practices to advance equality. These include the co-chair structure in the Greens/EFA and left GUE/NGL, shared by a woman and a man. The Greens/EFA has explicit provisions for gender balance in their statutes, and the S&D has a quota provision for its bureau, which is implemented (Kantola, forthcoming). The conservative EPP, in contrast has a quota provision for its presidency—which is, however, not implemented. The green/left groups have developed other practices too. For example, in the GUE/NGL, speaking time in group meetings is divided equally between genders. The Greens/EFA has developed internal measures for ensuring gender mainstreaming of all policies, which includes training, and is looking into developing a gender action plan for the group. The liberal ALDE group had had a heated quota debate in the past but settled against quotas and its statutes contain no provisions for equality (Kantola, forthcoming). The radical right populist groups, in contrast, oppose gender equality, and any "programming"

for gender equality, and they are particularly strongly opposed to any quotas (Kantola, forthcoming).

It is evident, then, that advancing gender equality polarizes the EP: it is a concern of the left–green political groups, in particular. Despite some advances in the conservative groups, such as quotas in the EPP, gender equality measures can be easily sidelined and not implemented. The radical right populist groups oppose formal practices for advancing gender equality within the groups as unnecessary or unwanted.

### Informal Practices Undermining Equality and Democracy

While formal practices show differences between political groups in democracy and inclusion of women, informal practices reveal democratic decision-making issues in all groups that are problematic for inclusion. Informal practices include transparent and open or hierarchical decision-making norms, debating and voting cultures of the group meetings, and gendered socialization norms (Ahrens, Elomäki, and Kantola, forthcoming). Some informal practices were overtly gendered. For example, some women MEPs opted out of political group meetings as a protest over radical right populists in the group (Kantola and Miller 2021). Informal norms are also revealed in the gendered expectations about women's roles in the EPP: "women are expected to be this kind of useful allies, not to challenge the group position, the party position, or anyone in leading position" (EPP MEP F 291118). Gendered expectations on women in that group were that women should be supportive rather than showing leadership or ambition.

Other informal practices concern groups' democratic decision-making. These reveal a lack of fit between radical right populists' constructions of themselves as democratic and their actual decision-making practices. After first saying that "the European Union is not a democracy, the European Union is an oligarchy and it's as bad as fascism or indeed communism, and it's basically communism or fascism by the backdoor," a male MEP from EFDD described his own group as "sort of fairly democratic." The interview continued:

> I: And how is the president chosen of the political grouping?
>
> R: That's a good question. We all voted for them I suppose. We voted for some people. I think at the end of the day there was no real opposition and the leader *sort of appeared*, which is Nigel Farage. (EFDD MEP M 290119_3)

This citation illustrates the contradiction between radical right populist claims that they embody democracy and their actual practices which reveal a lack of it. In their discourse, the "we" of radical right populists is constructed as reflecting themselves as democratic, while the "other" or "them," the EU and the EP, are specifically undemocratic. Yet, when asked about the election of

the leader of the political group, the interviewee says the leader "sort of appeared"—which is not indicative of a democratic and transparent process (Kantola and Miller, forthcoming).

Interviewed MEPs from the three biggest political groups, EPP, S&D, and ALDE/Renew, were more willing to recognize problems in the groups' democratic processes. One woman MEP from the EPP stated that, "formally it's an election" (of political group's leaders) but "it's a shabby process" (EPP MEP F 291118). Another woman MEP from the EPP considered decision-making neither open nor democratic (EPP MEP F 100320). A woman MEP from the liberal group, in turn, said: "Everything is settled at a very high level. So . . . it is also, very small group who nominates" (ALDE MEP F 210219). These interviews document the tension between formally democratic norms on the one hand and informal practices on the other, where decisions are taken in small circles at the top level, with little debate.

Little transparency and limited space for political debate was also mentioned by a male MEP from the S&D group, who described the decision-making as "a completely closed cabal" where there is little deliberation and in which they would "very rarely vote." In his words: "It's fixed basically . . . it's right at the end of the closed and hierarchical and opaque spectrum I would say." He explained that when they discuss controversial issues there is "informal pressure to not vote, and we don't vote" and "the leadership just does what it wants, which it decides behind closed doors" (S&D MEP M 161018). While feminist conceptualizations of democracy highlight the centrality of deliberative debate and differing views, these practices indicate a reduction of debate and oligarchization of decisions. Whilst recognizing these challenges, some MEPs also said that they were inevitable given the large size of the biggest groups, such as the EPP (187 MEPs after Brexit) (EPP MEP F 100320). The little space for deliberation, voting, and transparency mentioned in relation to the informal practices of all political groups proves problematic for including marginalized groups. Many of these informal practices uphold the whiteness of the EP, which has very few black and minority ethnic MEPs and few anti-racist practices to tackle the challenges of inclusion and participation of them (Ahrens et al. 2021).

## Democratic Dilemmas between Formal and Informal

The increased presence of radical right populists has generated practices in the EP that raise democratic dilemmas concerning participation and agonism. On the one hand, there is the nonengagement of radical right populists in parliamentary work, and on the other, their containment through a political *cordon sanitaire*. Nonengagement is a central radical right populist strategy vis-à-vis the EP that Brack (2018) calls playing the role of an "absentee," which includes completely withdrawing from policy-making, committees, and

legislative work. It is problematic because its aim is eroding the EP's democratic legitimacy (EFDD MEP M 290119_2).

*Cordon sanitaire* is a practice of containment that the presence of radical right populists in the EP has generated. This informal practice limits the participation of radical right populist groups and MEPs in parliamentary work by not accepting them as committee and delegation chairs, or as a parliamentary vice-president. The aim of the *cordon sanitaire* is to protect democracy from the danger of illiberal radical right populist politics. Its use is flexible, so the ECR had committee chair positions, unlike the EFDD and the ENF/ID, and the EFDD had a vice-president in the EP (Kantola and Miller 2021). However, it hinders possibilities for agonistic deliberation, as feminist theories recommend, limiting the space of debate. In daily work, the *cordon sanitaire* is a negotiated practice which creates practical dilemmas, as this interview with two male S&D staff shows. According to one: "It's very difficult to handle it because what do you do if, for example, somebody of extreme right, of populists has a dossier? ... Do you vote in favour or not in favour?" (M1). The other claims the principle was applied "in a sensitive and smart way" so that: "Sometimes it's basically ... against fascists and neo-Nazi, but in the case of some good quality, amendments or reports the group can also support" (M2) (S&D Group Staff M 290419).

Right populists, on their side, express dissatisfaction about the *cordon sanitaire* because it curtails their rights, as this interview claims:

> It always seems to me that the European Parliament aren't very sympathetic to Eurosceptic groups ... we had to wait ages before [Fabio Massimo Castaldo], became a vice president. (EFDD MEP F290119_1)

> what I noticed is, once you contribute something to a debate, to a discussion, people don't really listen to what you are actually saying. They're just seeing you as a person from the ID Group ... And that is something that could never ever happen in a democracy. Democracy lives from discussion, it lives from debate, and yes democracy is about having to hear things that you do not want to hear. (ID MEP F 110320)

Other groups were aware of the chances the *cordon sanitaire* offered for self-victimization (EPP Group Staff F060320; Renew Group Staff M050320). Some saw it as "completely ineffective" and rather emphasized the democratic need to engage: "You can disagree with some grouping and think that they are appalling, but by a *cordon sanitaire* you victimise them, and that they will just abuse to get stronger. So, in my view it's always better to engage, have a political discussion in public and, come with stronger arguments and prove them wrong. It's in my view always the democratic solution" (Renew Staff M 050320).

Informal practices of political groups, then, exposed the dilemmas and paradoxes of democracy in a parliament where the presence of radical right populists, and the responses to them which were devised to safeguard democracy,

challenged and eroded democratic institutions, to the detriment of inclusive deliberation and gender equality. However, the presence of oligarchical practices in other political groups suggests there is a need to revise informal political practices of all groups, to make them more inclusive and participatory and thus more democratic.

## Conclusions

Democracy in the EP oscillates between political struggles that are antagonistic (those which treat opponents as enemies to destroy) and ones that are agonistic (those which recognize and respect opponents). A more nuanced grasp of the dynamics of political groups offers greater insights about democratic discourses and practices and democratic dilemmas. Drawing on dimensions of inclusiveness and agonistic contestation shows that radical right populists challenge democracy, as both discourse and practice, through a variety of strategies. They commonly oppose and delegitimize gender equality policies and thus show scant respect for EU values enshrined in Article 2. Employing antagonistic argumentation, they use hate speech to attack and exclude marginalized groups and justify limiting the rights of women and LGBTI people under the guise of national or cultural interest. In addition, they use blue-card questions as a means of diverting attention from executive acts which breach the rule of law in Member States whose governments they represent or sympathize with. Such self-victimization and blame-shifting are always accompanied by strongly antagonistic language against political opponents and EU institutions, whose rules they break, and parliamentary work they disengage from, while simultaneously boasting of being champions of democracy for their people and their nation.

The analysis of radical right populist discourses and practices from feminist perspectives shows exclusionary and antagonistic dynamics of attacks against nonhegemonic subjects presented as "enemies" in the illiberal project of radical right groups. This calls for mainstreaming gender and other inequalities in studies on democratic backsliding in the EP.

We found that progressive and liberal groups, including some liberal conservatives within the EPP, generally promoted democracy. Their discourses and their formal practices defended the rule of law and fundamental rights, separation of powers and judicial independence, inclusiveness, agonistic debate, and respectful dialogue. They proposed reports on breaches to the rule of law and fundamental rights in Member States and enacted a *cordon sanitaire* to protect EU democratic institutions from illiberal MEPs—although this particular practice created difficulties in MEPs' daily work and agonistic dialogue. Gender conservatism and gendered expectations about the roles of women MEPs in the EPP showed marginal improvements in this group's equality practices; however, it is worth noting that the promotion of women's inclusion and participation is more of a concern for left, green, and liberal

political groups than it is for conservative and radical right populist groups. Finally, although all groups claim to respect formally democratic practices, all of them use informal practices that are problematic in relation to inclusiveness. Such noninclusive practices promote oligarchization of deliberation and decision-making, which generates problems for marginalized groups that tend to be excluded from small power circles. This indicates a need for all groups to democratize their own parliamentary practices toward greater inclusiveness.

The EP's groups, especially progressive ones, are taking initial steps toward a more feminist democratization by introducing new rules to foster gender equality, engage in a more agonistic way in defense of equality and human rights, and address the hate speech which has accompanied the rise of radical right populists in the Parliament. However, more could be done to democratize the EP. First, as Kelemen (2020) argues, the rules and political structures which permit EU funding to be channeled to authoritarian governments and to maintain their representatives in the Parliament are urgently in need of revision. Second, the EP needs to robustly defend the supportive and inclusive deliberation practices suggested by feminist theories, including training MEPs in the skills of democratic engagement, and strengthening and supporting feminist and LGBTI groups in the Parliament (the latter organized as cross-partisan issue groups, the so-called intergroups) that are on the frontline of anti-gender opposition.

While feminist theories are helpful for understanding dynamics around democracy in the EP and providing solutions, democratic dilemmas challenge both deliberative and conflict-based theories. Democracy is a complex equilibrium in which the protection of the rule of law from abusive practices might come at the expense of a possibly more agonistic debate and of a more fluid daily parliamentary work as with a *cordon sanitaire*. Gains in the direction of redemocratization of public space and the inclusiveness of subaltern subjects such as women and minoritized MEPs are in line with feminist participation theories by Pateman, Young, and Fraser. The question, however, is how to apply such theories as "guides" to a process that deepens and strengthens the quality of democracy in the light of current challenges to gender equality from radical right populist groups, whilst upholding strategies to preserve minimal democracy and respect for the rule of law.

Feminist conflict theories of democracy praise politicization and contestation. Mouffe's theory of conflict, however, does not solve the question of how to maintain agonistic politics when radical right populists breach the very fabric of democracy, undermine the rule of law and democratic pluralism, and make gender antagonistic. Nonetheless, Mouffe's argument about the need for all democrats to address the "democratic nucleus" of radical right populist rhetoric about their recovery of democracy from oligarchs and technocrats is worth considering, so that political efforts are targeted at deepening rather than restricting democracy and equality in the European Parliament.

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