Introduction: European Parliament's Political Groups in Turbulent Times

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INTRODUCTION

The aim of this volume is to provide innovative inroads into studying political groups as the key political actors in the European Parliament (EP). As alliances of national party delegations, political groups are unique to the EP. Without a European 'government' and with the EP as a legislator on equal footing with the Council of the European Union, political groups' guide proposals through the EP's legislative process and influence their content (Abels, 2019; Corbett et al., 2016). The chapters in this volume analyse the political groups' multiple functions, powers and

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practices both in terms of their *formal* institutional aspects and in terms of *informal* practices interacting with and shaping formal rules.

The EP's increased competences as a co-legislator have been praised as a victory for European democracy on the grounds of increasing the representative voice of citizens in European Union (EU) decision-making (Wiesner, 2018). The EP, as the only directly elected EU institution, now adopts (together with the Council) directives from the European Commission (EC) in almost all policy fields, acts as a budgetary authority and approves several nominations, including that of the President of the Commission and the Commissioners (Bressanelli & Chelotti, 2020; Héritier et al., 2019; Rittberger, 2012). Focusing on political groups enables critical scrutiny of whether this is exclusively a victory for democracy. Increased powers for the EP signify more power to its political groups, which necessitates a closer examination of their distinct decision-making and policy-making processes. This endeavour cautions against treating the EP predominantly as a homogenous institutional actor vis-a-vis other EU institutions, highlighting instead the multifaceted internal power struggles between and within the political groups and their impact on the EP's policy-making and EU legislative process.

Recent developments in EP demand renewed attention to political groups. Policy-making in the EP is in flux. The traditional 'grand coalition' of the two biggest political groups, the Group of the European People's Party (Christian Democrats) (EPP) and the Group of the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats in the EP (S&D), no longer holds the majority of seats in the parliament nor acts as the sole motor of EP policy-making. Radical right populists formed influential political groups after the 2014 and 2019 EP elections, shifting political dynamics within the EP through increased polarisation, new strategies and enhanced need for broad pro-EU coalitions (Brack, 2018; McDonnell & Werner, 2019; Ripoll Servent & Panning, 2019). So far, the impact of Eurosceptics and radical right populists is mainly seen at the discursive or rhetorical level in EP plenaries and not as a substantive policy impact in committees or trilogues (Brack, 2018; Kantola & Lombardo, 2021a; Ripoll Servent & Panning, 2019). However, after Brexit in 2020, one of these groups, Identity and Democracy (ID), became the fourth biggest group in parliament, with the aim of expanding its policy influence.

The chapters in this book expand the rich extant literature about political groups, where two interrelated topics have been seen as key aspects: (i) political group cohesion and (ii) coalition formation between

the groups (Hix et al., 2007; Kreppel & Tsebelis, 1999; Lefkofridi & Katsanidou, 2018; McElroy & Benoit, 2012; Raunio & Wagner, 2017; Schmitt & Thomassen, 1999). First, scholars have shown how—despite the lack of group discipline in the EP that separates EP political groups from national political parties—group cohesion has increased in parallel with the EP's powers, at least for the main pro-EU groups (Hix et al., 2007). Second, the EPP and the S&D coalition is part of a dynamic where the EU's institutional structure pushes the EP to unity and broad compromises between the pro-EU groups to obtain bargaining power vis-a-vis other EU institutions (Kreppel, 2002; Ripoll Servent, 2015). Most of these studies have drawn on quantitative roll-call vote data, which has enabled comparisons between and within groups and analyses of shifts over time.

An emerging strand of research has started to analyse the practices and processes through which the internal cohesion of political groups and coalitions between them are sought. Using qualitative and mixed methods, these scholars explore how power works at the micro level of politics, examining the role of informality, meanings and actors in the decision-making processes of political groups (Kantola & Miller, 2021, p. 782; see also Berthet & Kantola, 2020; Brack, 2018; Häge & Ringe, 2020; Ripoll Servent & Panning, 2019). Moreover, instead of focusing exclusively on formal institutions, there is an increased interest in understanding informal institutions, such as unwritten norms and practices, that shape how political groups work (see Kreppel, 2002; Bressanelli, 2014; Kantola & Miller, 2021; Ripoll Servent & Panning, 2019).

The aim of this volume is to provide new insights into the practices of political groups and the dynamics between them and, thus, to explain further the decision- and policy-making, including the power relations within and between the groups. To do this, many of the chapters use qualitative methods, including the analysis of interview data or parliamentary ethnography. The volume then illustrates how such qualitative studies can capture existing power relations on a macro level and within and between political groups. This includes revealing democratic practices and their erosion and conditions for equal political representation and participation at the heart of the democratic functioning of these institutions (Kantola & Miller, 2021, p. 782; Kantola & Lombardo, 2021b).

We begin this introductory chapter by discussing the core features of the political groups. We then present new inroads into the study

of political groups to consider how they function and how their practices and work can be analysed. Finally, we link political groups to research broader questions of democracy. We suggest that theorising the democratic functioning within the EP requires casting a critical eye on democratic practices in its different bodies, especially the growing salience of the internal processes, practices and power of the political groups. We close by providing an overview of the chapters of the volume.

The Core Features of Political Groups in the EP

Political groups of the EP are formed after each election. According to EP's rules, a political group must have 23 MEPs from at least seven member states and share political affinities. In the 9th parliament (2019–2024), there were seven political groups—some of which had existed since the 1950s and others which were formed after the elections (see Table 1.1; see also Ahrens and Rolandsen Agustín 2021). This section introduces these seven political groups by focusing on their composition and size, political ideology and policy cohesion. Additionally, many chapters analyse the Europe for Freedom and Direct Democracy (EFDD) group, which existed in the 8th parliament. Its two biggest national party delegations, the UKIP and the M5S from Italy, forged a 'marriage of convenience', putting aside their political differences to maximise EP resources (McDonnell & Werner, 2019, p. 15). This was insufficient in the long run, and the political group dissolved after the 2019 elections.

The *size of political groups* varies greatly from the largest EPP with 187 MEPs to the smallest, the Left in the EP (GUE/NGL), with 39 MEPs in the 2019–2024 term, after Brexit (see Table 1.1). Historically, the S&D was the biggest group from 1975 to 1999 and the EPP from the 1999 elections onwards. Currently, the Renew group is the third largest, followed by the radical right populist ID group. In the 8th parliament, the European Conservatives and Reformists Group (ECR), a Eurosceptic group founded by the British Conservatives that split from the EPP in 2009 (called EPP-ED at the time), was the third largest group. Reflecting the importance placed on this hierarchy in size, the way the ECR group bypassed ALDE and Greens/EFA was named one of its significant successes (Steven, 2020, p. 3). Similarly, Ahrens and Kantola (this volume) describe how painful it was for the Greens/EFA group to be bypassed by the radical right populist ID group after Brexit.

Table 1.1 EP's political groups in the 9th parliament (2019–2024) after Brexit

Political group	Full name	Founded (original year)	Number of MEPs	% of women MEPs	Member States of MEPs	Number of national delegations
EPP	Group of the European People's Party (Christian Democrats)	1953	187	31.55	27	47
S&D	Group of the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats in the European Parliament	1953	145	43.45	25	34
Renew	Renew Europe Group	2019 (Liberal group 1953)	98	40.82	22	38
ID	Identity and Democracy Group	2019 (ENF 2015)	75	38.67	10	10
Greens/EFA	Group of the Greens/European Free Alliance	1989 (Rainbow group 1984)	69	50.72	16	22
ECR	European Conservatives and Reformists Group	2009	62	30.65	15	17
GUE/NGL	The Left in the European Parliament	1994 (Communist Group 1974)	39	43.59	13	19

Data sources EP website, November 2020; Ahrens and Rolandsen Agustín 2021

This variation in size matters in policy terms because it impacts the relative political power of the groups in EP decision- and policy-making. Different leadership positions are divided based on the D'Hondt method in the parliament: the bigger the group, the more influence it has in the parliament regarding the President, Vice-President, Bureau and Committee Chair positions. Size also matters in policy-making, as large groups get the most important reports and have more say in inter-group

negotiations than smaller groups, which were often marginalised in the grand coalitions of the EPP and the S&D. Also, bigger groups have more resources for policy preparation.

A similar hierarchy in size and power explains the internal dynamics of political groups. Political groups comprise different *national party delegations,* and the largest national delegations wield considerable power within political groups (Kreppel, 2002, pp. 204–205; Ahrens & Kantola in this volume). For example, political group chairs are often selected from the largest national party delegations. The Germans form the biggest national party delegations for the EPP and the Greens/EFA, while, for example, in the S&D, the three biggest delegations, the Spanish, German and Italian, are fairly equal in numbers. The Renew Europe group, in turn, has shifted from a Northern emphasis in its predecessor, the ALDE group, to a French dominance. The French Rassemblement National and the Italian Lega dominate the ID, and the two strongly outnumber the other smaller groups. As seen in Table 1.1, the ECR fell into sixth place in group size when its previously largest national party delegation and founder, the UK Conservatives, dwindled into four MEPs. After Brexit in 2020, the Polish Law and Justice Party dominated the group, with a significant lead over the second largest group, Fratelli d'Italia, a post-fascist political party. GUE/NGL, characterised by its confederal nature, comprises three larger delegations from France, Germany and Greece and a high number of national delegations with only one or two MEPs.

The EP Rules of Procedure require political groups to share *political affinities*. Extant literature has illustrated how political affinity, defined as a shared political ideology, becomes very contested in political parties' diversity within political groups (McElroy & Benoit, 2012; Whitaker & Lynch, 2014). Political ideologies and ideological contestations matter internally for political group identities and policy positions. They also form a basis for distinguishing groups and their politics and for analysing cooperation and conflict between them. In previous studies, the EP was seen as a two-dimensional competitive arena structured along a socio-economic left–right cleavage (Hix et al., 2007), while others suggested classifying political groups as pro- or anti-EU integration (Otjes & van der Veer, 2016). Recently, the GAL (Greens, Alternatives, Libertarians) versus TAN (Traditionalists, Authoritarians, Nationalists) dimension was seen as useful (Ahrens et al., 2022; Hooghe et al., 2002, p. 985; Brack, 2018, pp. 56, 83; see Brack & Behm; Börzel & Hartlapp; Ripoll Servent in this volume).

Taking a brief look at political groups' ideological outlooks, it is evident that the EPP builds its political affinity on a conservative Christian Democrat and pro-European integration identity (Bardi et al., 2020), whereas the S&D is a social-democratic, pro-integration group. Renew builds its political affinity around 'liberalism', which often applies to both the economy and values. The Greens/EFA build their political affinity around environmental issues, human rights, equality and their decidedly pro-European integration position (Lefkofridi & Katsanidou, 2018). The left group GUE/NGL represents a soft Eurosceptic group critical of neoliberalism as an ideology and a policy approach (Brack, 2018). Finally, the ECR and the ID are radical right populist groups that oppose European integration and promote highly conservative norms built on radical right populist opposition to, for instance, equality (Gaweda et al., 2021; Steven, 2020). Given the diversity of the national party delegations within the political groups, any attempt to pin down the groups' ideologies can only be partial. Therefore, the book chapters delve deeper into their positions, internal negotiations and contradictions around them (see Brack & Behm; Börzel & Hartlapp; Ripoll Servent; Kantola in this volume).

Despite this diversity within groups, *voting cohesion* remains high for the most established groups. Research on this topic identified factors influencing group cohesion, such as group size, type of national party delegations and the policy issue available (Lefkofridi & Katsanidou, 2018; Warasin et al., 2019; Whitaker & Lynch, 2014), highlighted internal cleavages within the groups, such as between debtor and creditor countries (e.g. Vesan & Corti, 2019) and analysed whether and when MEPs vote with their national parties instead of the group (e.g. Rasmussen, 2008).

Three political groups reached significantly high voting cohesion in the previous full legislative term (8th Parliament). The Greens/EFA was the most cohesive group, with 96% cohesion (Warasin et al., 2019, p. 149). Despite the internal differences in economic policy and with the EFA and independent MEPs within the group, the political group tends to find a common line (see Elomäki et al. in this volume). The EPP and S&D voted cohesively on most issues, with 94% and 92% voting cohesion, respectively (Warasin et al., 2019, 149). This is enforced by formal rules in the groups and through a bottom-up policy negotiation structure (see Elomäki et al.; Bressanelli in this volume). EPP voting cohesion is slightly lower in employment policies, with a North–South split over its market-oriented approach to emphasising employability (Vesan & Corti, 2019). Gender

equality and LGBTQI issues, such as sexual and reproductive health and rights, are among the divisive issues for the group (Ahrens et al., 2022; Berthet & Kantola, 2020; Kantola & Rolandsen Agustín, 2016). Unlike the EPP, the S&D is fairly united regarding social policy (Vesan & Corti, 2019) and gender equality issues (Warasin et al., 2019).

Extant research shows that Renew's predecessor ALDE was less cohesive than the EPP and the S&D, reaching 88% cohesion in the 8th EP (Warasin et al., 2019, p. 149). Similarly, GUE/NGL is less cohesive than the pro-EU groups, with a cohesion of 83% in the 8th EP (Warasin et al., 2019, p. 149). GUE/NGL finds joint positions on policies such as social welfare, immigration and equality issues (Lefkofridi & Katsanidou, 2018). The ECR was the most cohesive of the right-wing Eurosceptic groups, with 79% in the 8th EP (Warasin et al., 2019, p. 149). The group is fairly cohesive in economic and social policies (Lefkofridi & Katsanidou, 2018), where it joins EPP and ALDE in calling for austerity and opposes more EU integration in social policy (Elomäki, 2021). The ID's predecessor ENF had a comparatively low voting cohesion of 69.5% in the 8th EP (Warasin et al., 2019, p. 149). The group opposed EU integration on economic and social matters but lacked clear policy lines on issues, such as austerity, given the mix of pro-welfare and pro-market attitudes within the group (Cavallaro et al., 2018).

Evidently, studying political groups induces numerous analytical questions about their powers and influence, ways of operating and the roles of MEPs and national party delegations within them. Any findings on the political groups tend to differ greatly depending, for instance, on the group's political ideology and the national party delegations' impact on the groups. Therefore, this makes the study of political groups both complex and interesting.

New Inroads into the Study of Political Groups

Here, we discuss some new avenues for studying political groups. We suggest that the political groups' multiple functions, powers and practices can be usefully analysed regarding their *formal* institutional aspects and *informal* practices, which interact with the formal roles and shape them. We begin by drawing on (new) institutionalism to define formal and informal institutions and then provide examples of how such approaches can inform analyses of political groups' activities and practices at inter-group, intra-group and inter-institutional levels.

Many chapters of this volume use the different variants of new institutionalism, which have developed an analytical distinction between formal and informal institutions (Helmke & Levitsky, 2004; Lowndes, 2020; Lowndes & Roberts, 2013; Mackay et al., 2010). While formal institutions are defined as codified rules communicated and enforced through official channels, informal institutions signify customary elements, traditions, moral values, religious beliefs and norms of behaviour (Chappell & Waylen, 2013, p. 605). They are 'hidden and embedded in the everyday practices disguised as standard and taken-for-granted' (ibid.). Regarding political groups, formal institutions comprise parliamentary rules of procedure and group statutes that regulate everything from how the EP functions as an institution and workplace to plenaries and the formation of political groups (Kantola & Miller, 2021, p. 786). Examples of informal institutions, in contrast, include unwritten practices, such as a cordon sanitaire or power hierarchies that are followed, although they are unwritten (Kantola & Miller, 2021, p. 786; Ripoll Servent, 2019). Like formal institutions, breaking informal institutions may involve sanctions. The relationship between formal and informal institutions may be competitive or complementary since informal rules may subvert or reinforce formal ones (Waylen, 2014, p. 213). Nevertheless, the distinction between formal and informal rules is not to be interpreted as clear-cut and dichotomous. Francesca Gains and Vivien Lowndes suggest analysing the mixtures of both formal and informal rules where some rules sit at the most formal end of a continuum, others in the middle and still others positioned at the most informal end (Gains & Lowndes, 2022).

The different dimensions of EP's political group's work can be studied through this dual focus on formal and informal aspects. First, this can be illustrated referencing *inter-group* activities—how political groups work with and against other political groups. These include parliamentary work undertaken in the plenary and committees, inter-groups, Conference of Presidents and co-hosted outreach events (see Kantola & Miller, 2021). In plenaries, political group leaders sit in the front row, followed by members of the bureau and heads of national party delegations (Corbett et al., 2016, p. 219). However, the majority of the EP's legislative work takes place in committees where reports are distributed between the groups using a competitive points system and where the groups negotiate for EP's positions. One example of an informal practice that influences all these activities is the *cordon sanitaire*—an informal and negotiated practice by which the 'mainstream' groups have closed off radical right

populist groups or MEPs from committee chair positions and do not allocate important reports to these groups nor seek their support during inter-group negotiations on policies (Kantola & Miller, 2021; Ripoll Servent, 2019; Ripoll Servent in this volume).

The most studied inter-group activity from the perspective of the interplay of formal and informal institutions is their negotiations over policies. Despite the wishes for more party-political competition in the EP (Hix et al., 2007), its negotiation culture is geared towards consensus-seeking and compromising (Ripoll Servent, 2015; Roger, 2016). Negotiations and compromises between the groups mainly occur in the so-called shadows meetings between the rapporteur and shadow rapporteurs and informal private meetings between key groups. In these negotiations, the groups are in an unequal position. Coalition formation also often entails creating issue-based alliances between MEPs and national delegations across groups (Vesan & Corti, 2019). Smaller groups and their interests are often marginalised, and they may struggle to integrate their views, particularly in situations where their votes are not needed to form a majority (Elomäki, 2021; Kreppel, 2002), thus illustrating the impact of informal negotiation practices on the power dynamics between the groups.

A second way to look at the usefulness of focusing on formal and informal institutions in political group activities is to focus on *intra-group* activities. These comprise political and administrative activities, which occur in the bureau of the political groups, secretariat, political group meetings and working groups, and constitute internal policy negotiation processes (Kantola & Miller, 2021). The political groups' internal processes and structures have become more formalised and centralised over the years, notably due to the increased group size after the 2004 EU enlargement (Bressanelli, 2014; see Bressanelli in this volume). Unlike some other political group functions, there is relatively little academic research into intra-group activities—both formal and informal. Intra-group activities, however, matter because they shape MEPs' political work and efficacy, including the democratic and efficient functioning of the political groups themselves. Negotiating and regulating group leadership are prime examples of intra-group activities. Political groups have notably different selection procedures for these positions, combining both formal rules and procedures and informal norms. Formal rules in political group statutes can make for open and transparent selection procedures and enhance equality and democracy, while informal norms—prominent

in the radical right groups—induce more opaque and less democratic processes (Kantola & Miller, 2022; see Ahrens & Kantola in this volume).

Formal and informal aspects of intra-group activities also matter for political groups' policy positions. Compared with national political parties, political groups lack well-defined legislative agendas that highlight the role of political negotiations (Roger & Winzen, 2015). Here, the scarcity of research on intra-group policy-formation practices, both formal and informal, is notable (see however Roger & Winzen, 2015). The topic is addressed explicitly by Elomäki, Gaweda and Berthet (in this volume), who analyse the formal and informal institutions shaping the internal policy-making processes and political groups' practices and how they differ.

Our third example comes from the *inter-institutional* activities of the political groups in the EP. Johansson and Raunio (in this volume) describe the significance of both formal (official roles given to political groups) and informal (such as personal contacts, networks and dinners) inter-institutional activities in the context of EU reform processes. Inter-institutional activities are also exemplified by the so-called trilogues. Trilogues constitute a 'secluded fora' and a set of informal meetings during which representatives of the EP, the Council and the Commission negotiate compromises (Ripoll Servent & Panning, 2019; Ripoll Servent in this volume). They were introduced because of the EP's increased powers and responded to the consequent challenges around large numbers of files and the complexity of the issues, as well as to ensure an early-on and smooth dialogue between the institutions during the first stage of the codecision procedure (Farrell & Héritier, 2004; Roederer-Rynning & Greenwood, 2015). Over the years, the EP's negotiating practices have been formalised in parliament's rules of procedure.

Trilogues have been suggested to make policy more efficient, yet they have been criticised for the new level of informality. There is a severe lack of transparency and public scrutiny regarding how decisions are reached, how political conflicts play out and how power is wielded between the different political actors (Ripoll Servent & Panning, 2019, p. 756). Regarding democracy, the EP is in danger of becoming a rubber stamp with negotiations outside committee meetings and the plenary (Ripoll Servent & Panning, 2019, p. 756). A focus on political groups, in turn, further highlights the challenges to democracy posed by the trilogues. Hard Eurosceptic groups have been excluded from the trilogues using the informal institution of *cordon sanitaire* (Ripoll Servent & Panning, 2019).

Alternatively, Ripoll Servent (in this volume) shows how the EPP co-operated with the radical right on the level of ideas—making the *cordon sanitaire* meaningless—which led to easier inter-institutional negotiations with the resulting EP report reflecting the positions of member states.

This section has discussed what combining a focus on formal and informal institutions could bring to the study of political groups. Many chapters in this volume adopt this perspective to highlight new aspects of the power relations and struggles between and within the groups and in the workings of the groups with other EU institutions. The work of political groups extends to relations and cooperation with different stakeholders, civil society, lobbyists and media, Europarties and different parliamentary actors within the EP. The ways to study the formal and informal activities and practices proposed here could easily be extended to these dimensions. Johansson and Raunio (in this volume) cover these aspects of political group activities by focusing on the Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFoE) and the political groups' struggles to set the agenda for it in cooperation with other EU institutions, such as the Commission, Europarties and civil society.

Evaluating Political Groups: Focus on Democratic Practices

The struggle for democratic legitimacy is a well-known and widely discussed issue for the EU on which its fate is often thought to hang. The EP is often described as the most democratic actor of the EU institutions since it is the only directly elected body. Its political groups, in turn, are key to the functioning of democracy within the EP because of the party's political competition they represent (Hix et al., 2007; Lindberg et al., 2008). Simultaneously, democracy across Europe is challenged with increasing radical right populism, authoritarianism and illiberalism (Kelemen, 2020; Morijn, 2019). The examples above, such as the trilogues, describe how policy-making in the EP has become removed from democratic ideals about openness, participation and public scrutiny. Some have argued that this tendency towards professionalisation, technocratisation and depoliticisation is common to EU policy-making and fuels illiberal populism (Mudde, 2021; Schmidt, 2020). How democratic are the groups, how do they hold up liberal democracy and democratic practices within them? In this endeavour, the scholarly attention to formal and informal institutions of political groups, as discussed above, can

usefully be combined with critical questions about the *democratic practices* of political groups, an issue we turn to in the final section of this chapter.

Democratic legitimacy has traditionally been conceptualised regarding output and input legitimacy. Output legitimacy entails that policies are provided for the common good; it requires attention to policies' effectiveness and performance (Schmidt, 2020, p. 8). Input legitimacy, in turn, enquires whether policies reflect the 'will of the people' and highlights citizens' engagement with political processes and the government's responsiveness to citizens' concerns (Schmidt, 2020, p. 8). Schmidt adds a third dimension: *throughput legitimacy* is the procedural quality of the policy-making processes, which 'sits in between the input and the output, in the "black box" of governance' (Schmidt, 2020, p. 8). It requires the policy-making process to be democratic. Democratic practices that ensure this include participation, accountability, transparency, inclusion and equality (Schmidt, 2020, p. 8).

Political groups have mainly been discussed from the perspective of input legitimacy. Scholars have long considered the weak electoral connection between EU citizens and their representatives in the EP, reflected in the low voting turnout in European elections and owing to the second-order nature of these elections (Hix et al., 2007; Lindberg et al., 2008). The link between the political groups and EU citizens was severed because it is the national and not the EU-level parties that nominate the candidates to European elections. Furthermore, the citizens' vote is based on domestic concerns rather than on expressing their view on who should be the largest group in the EP and what the EP's political agenda should be (Hix et al., 2007, p. 28). This has raised the question of whether the political groups can fulfil the traditional role of political parties as 'transmission belts' between the citizens and the EU level (Lindberg et al., 2008; see Johansson & Raunio in this volume). The *Spitzenkandidatur* system proposed to remedy the situation (e.g. Hix et al., 2007) has not significantly increased voters' interest and participation in the EU elections, although it empowered the EP in 2014 (e.g. Hobolt, 2014).

Another key question identified with input legitimacy and political groups was whether there is enough party political competition to reflect citizens' concerns in the parliament's policy-making. The challenge that the EP is more effective when it presents a united front in

inter-institutional negotiations has been discussed above and is perti-
nent here. While some suggested that the EP's increased powers induced
more party's political competition and thus a more 'democratic struc-
ture of politics' based on left–right competition (Hix et al., 2007), others
have argued that hopes for such 'democratic politics' should be treated
with caution, provided the inter-institutional bargaining process pushes
for EP unity. The EP's increased powers as a budgetary authority and
co-legislator since the Lisbon Treaty have increased the long-standing
pressure for left–right compromise and the grand coalition between the
EPP and the S&D (Ripoll Servent, 2015). Moreover, the pro-/anti-EU
cleavage in the EP has become more important due to the growing repre-
sentation of Eurosceptic and populist parties in the EP and the Eurozone
crises (Brack, 2018; Otjes & van der Veer, 2016; see Brack & Behm;
Börzel & Hartlapp; Ripoll Servent in this volume). This was also the case
in economic policy, where ideological contestation along the left–right
axis has traditionally been dominant.

Importantly, while input legitimacy is well debated, less scholarly
attention has been paid to throughput legitimacy: democratic practices
regarding decision-making within the political groups. Yet, democratic
practices such as transparency, the inclusion of diverse voices, public
deliberation and participation shape interactions and power hierarchies
between the groups and influence policy outcomes. Democratic prac-
tices 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.
Analysing democratic practices requires considering formal and informal
practices and their interactions (see Ahrens & Kantola; Elomäki et al.;
Kantola in this volume). Miller (in this volume) shows how parliamentary
ethnography can particularly well reveal informal institutions regarding
democratic practices. Formal and informal practices within the groups
for the allocation of leadership positions, policy-formation processes,
deliberation and expression of dissent and representation significantly
impact policy outcomes, including the groups' ability to channel citizens'
interests in EP's decision-making (Johansson & Raunio in this volume;
Kantola & Lombardo, 2021b).

Such democratic practices become particularly interesting when consid-
ering the turbulent times EP faces due to the rise of radical right populism
and illiberalism. The EP commonly upholds the values of democracy in
EU policy-making, including equality, human rights and minorities' rights

(Ahrens et al., 2022; see Kantola; Morijn in this volume). However, the EP is far from a united actor regarding these values. Rather, right-wing populist parties from different political groups use similar anti-gender rhetoric to oppose the EU's advancement of gender equality (Kantola & Lombardo, 2021a). Kelemen (2020) and Morijn (2019) argued that the current system incentivises parliament's political groups to protect the illiberal national elements within them (see also Morijn in this volume). Mainstream parties have relied on radical right populists to enhance their political groups' bargaining power in an environment where political groups compete in size and influence parliamentary positions and votes (Kelemen, 2020, p. 484). This explains Fidesz's position within the European People's Party (EPP) Europarty and the EPP political group within the EP until 2021, when Viktor Orbán, not the EPP, announced Fidesz's leave from the political group. The S&D political group similarly struggled with its Romanian and Bulgarian delegations, indicating the existence of anti-democratic forces within the political left (Zacharenko, 2020, p. 17). Populist politics accentuates questions about the possibilities for democratic politics within the EP and the role of political groups in it.

The Chapters of the Book

This volume's chapters differently address these core themes. In Chapters 2–4, the internal dynamics and practices of the political groups and the broader implications for the EP legislative process and supranational democracy are analysed. Chapters 5–7 move the focus towards intergroup dynamics, focusing specifically on the behaviour of the radical right populist groups and MEPs and their relationship to mainstream groups and their impact on EP policy-making. In Chapters 8–10, the political groups regarding the broader EU context, including inter-institutional negotiations for the Conference on the Future of Europe and broader normative issues about democracy and equality, are considered. Finally, Chapter 11 takes a methodological approach evaluating what can be gained by researching political groups through parliamentary ethnography.

Petra Ahrens and *Johanna Kantola's* chapter 'Negotiating Power and Democracy in Political Group Formation in the European Parliament' develops a framework of four layers of political group formation. It illustrates how informal practices and norms added to the formal rules

of the EP and shape political group formation processes throughout the legislative term. The four intertwined layers are characterised by differing democratic practices. They include formal political group formation after EP elections, internal political group formation via core functions, internal political group formation via consolidation through policies and distributing policy field responsibilities and changes to political group composition during the term. The chapter reveals similarities and clear differences between political groups for each of the four layers, which enhances the understanding of variations in negotiating power and democracy among the different political groups.

Edoardo Bressanelli's chapter, 'The Political Groups as Organisations: The Institutionalisation of Transnational Party Politics', investigates the process of institutionalisation of the two largest political groups in the EP, the EPP and the S&D, over the past four decades, explaining the internal organisation and organisational development of the groups. He argues that organisational development was triggered by external events, such as the enlargement towards Central and Eastern Europe and the legislative empowerment of the EP due to the Lisbon Treaty. The chapter shows that, over time, the groups have become both more complex, differentiated and autonomous from the national member parties. Still, the latter plays an important but often overlooked roles within the group organisation.

In their chapter 'Democratic Practices and Political Dynamics of Intra-Group Policy Formation in the European Parliament', *Anna Elomäki, Barbara Gaweda and Valentine Berthet* dive deeper into the internal processes of the political groups, focusing on internal policy-making processes and practices. Elomäki, Gaweda and Berthet approach the topic from the perspective of formal and informal democratic practices regarding inclusion, deliberation and transparency, which influence whose voice is heard. The chapter reveals differences between the groups' practices and the value given to unified positions linked to the group's size and position in EP decision-making. Elomäki, Gaweda and Berthet argue that intragroup struggles about policy are as important for the democratic functioning of the EP as party's political contestation between the groups.

Turning to the issue of Euroscepticism, *Tanja A. Börzel* and *Miriam Hartlapp's* chapter 'Eurosceptic Contestation and Legislative Behaviour in the European Parliament' reveals how Eurosceptic contestation translates into voting behaviour and how the members of Eurosceptic groups engage in committee work and plenary debates. Börzel and Hartlapp find

that Eurosceptic contestation is stronger in policy fields characterised by cultural cleavages and weaker in fields dominated by left–right ideologies or national interests; also, Eurosceptic opposition may form alliances with MEPs from mainstream parties. An alternative view on democratic practices in the EU policy-making is offered in this chapter, suggesting that Eurosceptic contestation is a vital feature of democratic practices within the EP rather than something undermining policy-making and European integration.

Ariadna Ripoll Servent's chapter 'When Words Do Not Follow Deeds: An Analysis of Party Competition between Centre-Right and Eurosceptic Radical-Right Parties in the European Parliament' analyses the pressure that Eurosceptic and populist parties put on mainstream centre-right parties. It focuses specifically on the EPP's pivotal position in the EP and how the group has negotiated the impact of the far-right. A detailed content analysis of legislative amendments from two files on the contested issue of migration is provided in this chapter. Ripoll Servent examines whether and under which conditions the positions of the EPP can be delimited from those of far-right Eurosceptic and populist parties. The findings of the chapter reveal, on one hand, the intense practical and ideological engagements with the radical right by the EPP. On the other hand, the EPP did not engage with the most radical far-right contenders and continued to apply the cordon sanitaire. Paradoxically, the acceptance of the language of the far-right made the cordon sanitaire meaningless.

Nathalie Brack and *Anne-Sophie Behm's* chapter 'How Do Eurosceptics Wage Opposition in the European Parliament? Patterns of Behaviour in the 8th Legislature' analyses how Eurosceptic MEPs behave within the parliament, what they criticise and oppose and how the differences between Eurosceptics can be explained. Brack and Behm analyse the parliamentary behaviour of Eurosceptic MEPs in the 8th EP legislature (2014–2019). The findings demonstrate that there are diverging patterns of engagement among the three different types of opposition actors. These include, first, MEPs of the non-Eurosceptic, 'loyal' opposition who aim to provide an alternative to the grand coalition and focus strongly on legislative and scrutiny activities. Second, the soft Eurosceptic MEPs, the 'critical' opposition, are less integrated in the EP but still engage in parliamentary life. Finally, hard Eurosceptics constitute an 'anti-system' opposition, concentrating on activities with a potential publicity character.

Karl Magnus Johansson and *Tapio Raunio*'s chapter 'Shaping the EU's Future? Europarties, European Parliament's Political Groups and

the Conference on the Future of Europe' focuses on the most recent attempts to reform the EU and the role that Europarties and political groups play in such processes. The two sets of actors have a history of influencing EU Treaty amendments. Johansson and Raunio explore the different avenues and strategies of the three largest Europarties—European People's Party, Party of European Socialists, Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe—and their EP groups utilised for shaping the agenda of the Conference on the Future of Europe. The authors examine the distribution of power between Europarties and political groups and particularly consider the dynamics inside EP political groups. The findings suggest that the agenda-setting stage of the conference was strongly influenced by political group leaders and other more senior individual MEPs, many of whom are seasoned veterans of inter-institutional bargaining and EU constitutional development.

John Morijn's chapter '(Disap)pointing in the Mirror: the European Parliament's Obligations to Protect EU Basic Values in Member States and at EU level' illustrates the EP's so far lukewarm engagement in handling national party delegations in political groups and Europarties opposing the fundamental values enshrined in Article 2 TEU. Morijn examines the setting for the political groups in the broader context of the ongoing Article 7 procedures against Hungary and Poland and EU regulations for Europarties. By engaging with the revised EP Rules of Procedure, the hidden barriers for political groups in holding each other responsible for respecting EU values are explored in the chapter, especially when some of their national delegations are prone to question them. Morijn suggests that—to effectively protect EU values—the EP and particularly its political groups would need to further substantiate existing formal rules.

Johanna Kantola's chapter 'Parliamentary Politics and Polarisation around Gender: Tackling Inequalities in Political Groups in the European Parliament' focuses on the issue of gender equality, which, while being a fundamental EU value, has become increasingly contested in the EP. Kantola analyses the internal functioning of parliament's political groups from the perspective of gender equality. Rather than focusing on policies and policy-making processes, she analyses how MEPs and staff perceive political groups as gendered actors. This involves examining both remaining gender inequalities and practices for advancing gender equality at the political group level. The findings show that despite the

political groups' differences, gender inequalities persist across the political spectrum. In the chapter, how political groups show different levels of commitment to gender equality and employ different practices in advancing it with the potential for democratic representation and political work is considered.

Cherry Miller's chapter '"Ethno, Ethno, What?": Using Ethnography to Explore the European Parliament's Political Groups in Turbulent Times' asks for what insights parliamentary ethnography adds to our study and understanding of EP political groups. The chapter provides a detailed account of three ethnographic practices and their usefulness for studying political groups: shadowing, meeting ethnography and hanging out. Miller suggests that ethnographic enquiry is perfectly placed to explain the three interlinked themes that are the heart of this volume: democracy, party politics and turbulent times.

The final chapter by *Anna Elomäki*, *Petra Ahrens* and *Johanna Kantola* 'Turbulent Times for the European Parliament's Political Groups? Lessons on Continuity and Change' discusses the contributions of the individual chapters and the book by focusing on three issues: the significance of the findings for questions about democracy, the turbulence caused by Euroscepticism and radical right populism and the benefits of analysing both formal and informal institutions to the political groups.

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