



Shaping the EU's Future? Europarties, European Parliament's Political Groups and the Conference on the Future of Europe

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INTRODUCTION

Europarties are most likely unknown organisations even among most activists of their national member parties. This is not surprising. In European Parliament (EP) elections, the political groups of the Europarties remain firmly in the background, and Europarties and the EP groups seldom feature in national medias. Europarties and EP political groups are officially independent of each other, but it is nonetheless more realistic to view them as part of the same Europarty organisation. Political groups

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exist in the Parliament, while Europarties are extra-parliamentary organisations that bring together national parties across the European Union (EU) to pursue shared political objectives and to field candidates for the post of Commission President (the so-called *Spitzenkandidaten*).

Through their national heads of government, EP groups and Commission portfolios, Europarties are in a powerful position to shape the laws, policies and agenda of the EU. Europarties and EP political groups have also decades of experience from Treaty amendments and inter-institutional bargaining. Given the initially weak powers of the Parliament, in these constitutional processes the Europarties have successfully campaigned in favour of empowering the EP, thereby also consolidating the role of the Europarties in the EU's political regime. The Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFoE) represents thus another opportunity for the Europarties and the EP groups to shape both the direction of integration and the institutional set-up of the EU. Designed as a major exercise in deliberative democracy to discuss the future of Europe and bringing together citizens across the Union, the start of the CoFoE was delayed until May 2021 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Utilising both virtual platforms and events in Brussels, Strasbourg and the member states, by spring 2022 the Conference is expected to reach conclusions and provide guidance on the future of Europe. However, member states remain hesitant about the CoFoE resulting in Treaty change.

Examining the CoFoE and focusing on the three largest Europarties, the European People's Party (EPP), the Party of European Socialists (PES) and the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE), our study is guided by three research questions. First, it explores the various avenues and strategies through which the Europarties and EP groups seek to influence the Conference: coalition-building in the Parliament, and links with the Commission, national member parties and European political foundations that are linked to the Europarties. Second, it analyses the division of labour between Europarties and their EP groups as well as the balance of power inside the political groups regarding the CoFoE. And third, on a more normative level, it examines whether 'political parties at European level contribute to forming European political awareness and to expressing the will of citizens of the Union' as outlined in the EU treaties (Article 10(4), Consolidated version of the Treaty on European Union). Europarties and EP groups can enhance the legitimacy of European integration, particularly if they facilitate citizen participation in EU constitutional processes.

The theoretical framework is divided into two parts. The next section focuses on the importance of agenda-setting in EU politics, while the subsequent section examines the strategies of Europarties and the EP political groups in previous rounds of constitutional reform. The empirical analysis, drawing on interviews and document analysis, covers the initial phases of the process: the decision to set up the CoFoE and defining its agenda. The interviewees are from the central offices of EPP, PES and ALDE, select MEPs involved in the Conference, as well as individuals from the Commission, the Parliament and the political foundations affiliated with the three Europarties. The interviews were semi-structured and carried out between spring 2020 and the summer of 2021. Documents consist of position papers, resolutions, press releases and other material produced by the EU institutions, Europarties, media and the political foundations. The concluding section summarises the findings and discusses how our study contributes to the understanding of EU democracy.

AGENDA-SETTING IN EU POLITICS

Agenda-setting is a fundamentally important stage of any decision-making process. Starting with Cobb and Elder (1971), academic research has produced a number of different typologies and approaches to studying agenda-setting. The literature often identifies three types of agendas: the public agenda includes issues that citizens find salient; the media agenda consists of issues that are covered by the media; and the political agenda includes issues that policy-makers deal with. According to the so-called multiple streams framework (MSF) model (Ackrill et al., 2013; Béland & Howlett, 2016; Kingdon, 1984), policy-making processes consist of three streams: the problem stream consists of problem perceptions among policy-makers; the solution stream consists of proposals for political decisions; and the politics stream consists of political activities and developments like lobby campaigns, or the political context in which decision-making occurs. The links between the three streams are made by issue entrepreneurs, individuals or organisations that 'are willing to invest their time and energy in promoting a particular issue' (Elder & Cobb, 1984, p. 121). And when these three streams meet, a 'policy window' opens and the issue moves to the agenda of decision-makers. Within MSF, 'the analytical task is to specify the dynamic and complex interactions that generate specific policy outcomes' (Ackrill et al., 2013, pp. 872–873), but

particularly in complex settings such as the EU, this can be inherently difficult. Hence, we focus on how and to what extent Europarties and their EP groups influence the CoFoE agenda.

As for the origins of issues on the agenda, they can come from the external environment or from the political actors themselves (Mansbach & Vasquez, 1981). The former approach sees political issues arising from the international environment. The latter category in turn includes issues that arise from the interests of the actual stakeholders, the political institutions and actors within them. As argued by Princen (2007, 2009), in EU governance the latter approach is normally more appropriate for understanding the sources of items on the agenda of the EU institutions, although major external developments such as terrorist attacks, refugee crisis or climate change can obviously feature high on the EU agenda. National governments or interest groups try to move issues to the Brussels agenda, and the European level actors have their own strong reasons for having matters debated in EU institutions.

Agenda-setting success is often influenced by how problems are framed. Issue entrepreneurs can refer to broadly shared fundamental values (e.g. human rights, sustainable development or democracy), or use an alternative strategy of ‘small steps’ whereby support is gradually built up through more low-key strategies, including behind-the-scenes processes and depoliticisation of issues (Princen, 2011). A related tactic is issue bundling or what in MSF terminology is called coupling: ‘Apart from skills and resources, entrepreneurs pursue strategies to join together problems and policies into attractive packages, which are then “sold” to receptive policy-makers’ (Ackrill et al., 2013, p. 873). Considering the ‘distance’ between Brussels and average citizens, ‘agenda-setting strategies in the EU will be focused more exclusively on dynamics that take place within policy communities than on reaching out to larger audiences outside of those communities’ (Princen, 2011, p. 940). And, as Princen also points out, broadening the scope of participation entails the risk of creating controversy and opposition. Regarding the CoFoE, proposals such as transnational lists for EP elections are sure not to please the more Eurosceptical politicians.

Another key dimension concerns the ‘venue’ (Baumgartner & Jones, 1993), that is, where and by whom the issue is debated. Princen (2011) distinguishes between venue shopping and venue modification. ‘Venue shopping occurs when agenda-setters seek out a venue (among those available to them) that is most receptive to their cause. Within the EU,

venue shopping may occur between EU institutions (horizontal venue shopping) and between the different “levels” in the multilevel system that the EU forms part of (vertical venue shopping)’ (Princen, 2011, p. 931). Venue shopping occurs among already existing venues, whereas venue modification means that ‘if a suitable venue is not available, actors may sometimes also be able to modify the range of available venues in order to create one that is better suited to their purposes’ (Princen, 2011, p. 933). For example, in EU governance environmental activists may prefer that environmental policies are on the agenda of actors that are likely to have more pro-environment positions. For CoFoE, the relevant question is the balance between supranational (EP, Commission) and more intergovernmental (Council, European Council) institutions.

EU CONSTITUTIONAL REFORMS, PARTY POLITICS AND ACCUMULATED EXPERIENCE

The Europarties have been recognised in the EU Treaties since the 1990s. Since 2004 the Europarties have received money from the EU’s budget, and this has triggered the establishment of several new Europarties. Existing research has mainly analysed the internal organisation and organisational development of Europarties (e.g. Delwit et al., 2004; Gagatsek, 2008, 2009; Timus & Lightfoot, 2014), or their constitutionalisation and financial regulation (e.g. Johansson & Raunio, 2005; Wolfs, 2019).

However, existing research grapples with the question of impact: do Europarties matter? Most of the existing research has focused on the role of Europarties in Intergovernmental Conferences (IGC) negotiating Treaty reforms. Here the evidence is somewhat mixed, but points in the direction of Europarties and the EP groups wielding even decisive influence in the IGCs and the European Council summits. The standard answer is that influence is conditional, depending largely on the capacity of Europarties to mobilise ‘their’ heads of national governments for the party cause (Johansson, 2016, 2017; see also Van Hecke, 2010). Pre-European Council summit meetings among government/party leaders are a central aspect of this mobilisation process, but their significance appears to vary over time and across party families. For example, the influence of the EPP was apparent during the Maastricht Treaty negotiations (Johansson, 2002a). Yet, there is also evidence from the PES that a lack of commitment by the heads of government has reduced its significance (e.g. Van Hecke & Johansson, 2013a, 2013b). Obviously the

relative bargaining weight of individual Europarties is stronger when they are more strongly represented in the European Council (Hix & Lord, 1997; Johansson, 1999, 2002a, 2002b, 2016, 2017; Lightfoot, 2005; Tallberg & Johansson, 2008).

It can also be difficult to draw a line between influence exerted by Europarties and their respective EP groups. Exploring the role of the EPP political group in Treaty reform processes since the 1980s, Johansson (2020) concludes that the EPP group mostly emerges as an influential player, even if not always a unitary actor. Johansson also showed that the EPP political group and the actual Europarty seemed very much in sync throughout the Treaty reforms, and that the EPP has developed its own strategies and networks over the decades—experience that clearly facilitates policy influence. Informal, even personal, partisan links can be highly crucial. For example, there is ample evidence that individuals with privileged access to the German Christian Democratic Chancellors and their assistants have been the key players within the EPP. Moreover, power asymmetries inside the political group cannot be avoided, with some individual MEPs and national delegations carrying more political weight than others. These are dimensions we also explore in our empirical analysis.

This leads to our case selection. We concentrate on the three largest and traditionally most influential European party families—the centre-right (conservatives and Christian Democrats) EPP, the centre-left PES and the liberal ALDE. In the Parliament, the respective group names are EPP, Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats (S&D) and Renew Europe—the liberal group adopted its current name after the 2019 elections when it formed a pact with the *La République En Marche!*, the party established by the French President Emmanuel Macron. There is substantial overlap in terms of national parties. Measuring the percentage of MEPs belonging to the EP political group that are also members of a national party belonging to the corresponding Europarty, in the 2009–2014 and 2014–2019 legislative terms the overlap was around 90% or above in EPP and PES while somewhat lower in ALDE. The EP political groups are strongly present in the various decision-making bodies of the Europarties, and have much better resources than the respective Europarties, both in terms of funding and staff. (For details, see Calossi, 2014; Calossi & Cicchi, 2019).

Turning to the weight of the three party families in the EU institutions, the EP party system has throughout the history of the Parliament been in practice dominated by the ‘grand coalition’ of EPP and social

democrats, with the liberal group also present in the chamber since the 1950s (Hix et al., 2007). EPP has been the largest political group since the 1999 elections. In June 2021, EPP controls 178 seats, S&D 146 and Renew 97 (out of a total of 705 seats). In fact, after the 2019 elections, the two largest groups for the first time control less than half of the seats in the chamber—a situation which should increase the bargaining weight of the smaller political groups. While the primary decision rule in EP is simple majority, for certain issues (mainly budget amendments and second-reading legislative amendments adopted under the co-decision procedure), the Parliament needs absolute majorities (50% plus one MEP). Apart from this absolute majority requirement, cooperation between EPP and S&D is also influenced by inter-institutional considerations as the Parliament has needed to moderate its resolutions in order to get its amendments accepted by the Council and the Commission (Kreppel, 2002). And when the two large groups have failed to agree, the numerically much smaller liberal group, situated ideologically between the EPP and PES, has often been in a pivotal position in forming winning coalitions in the chamber. Pragmatic cooperation between the EPP and S&D means that most issues are essentially precooked at the committee stage—thus paving the way for plenary votes adopted by ‘supermajorities’, or what Bowler and McElroy (2015) have called ‘hurrah votes’.

The main EP political groups are definitely institutionalised, mature organisations. They have decades of experience of building unitary group positions, of bargaining with each other in order to form winning coalitions, and of interacting with the Commission and other European level actors. Equally important is the ‘underdog’ position of the Parliament. Initially a purely consultative body with members seconded from national parliaments, the EP is today vested with significant legislative, control and budgetary powers. In addition, MEPs have proven remarkably inventive in pushing for more powers between IGCs, adopting practices that have over time become the established course of action (Héritier et al., 2019). In these inter-institutional battles, the leading figures in the Parliament—notably political group chairs—have been strongly present, thereby signalling that the issue is important for the Parliament and that there is broad support in the chamber for the reform. This stands in contrast to normal legislative processes, where rapporteurs and MEPs with relevant policy expertise are influential within the political groups and in the Parliament as a whole. As the agenda of the CoFoE focuses

quite strongly on institutional questions, the EP and its political groups thus have their own interests at stake.

The same party-political situation extends to the Commission, where EPP, PES and ALDE have controlled most and occasionally even all portfolios since the 1950s. In the Commission appointed in late 2019 and led by Ursula von der Leyen (EPP), EPP has ten, PES nine and ALDE five Commissioners (having thus 24 out of 27 positions). Informal ties are also important, with for example the EPP, both its political group and the Europarty, having regular dinners and other modes of contact with the Commission (Bardi, 2020). Moreover, Europarties and EP groups can seek to influence agenda-setting more indirectly via interest groups, think-tanks and other actors close to them—and indeed, these same actors can in turn lobby the Europarties. Of specific interest are political foundations, organisations funded via the EU budget and affiliated with a Europarty that should contribute to debates about both European public policy issues and the broader process of European integration. The political foundations mainly do this through publications and organising various events such as seminars and conferences, as well as through maintaining active networks with their national member foundations, each other and of course with the Europarties and their EP groups. The respective foundations have very close links with their Europarties, helping them in drafting manifestos, resolutions, as well as more long-term strategies and programmes (Bardi et al., 2014; Gagatek & Van Hecke, 2014). As of 2021, EPP has the Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies, PES the Foundation for European Progressive Studies (FEPS) and ALDE the European Liberal Forum. Given the quite limited resources of Europarties, the political foundations should improve their policy-making capacity, not least in terms of offering new ideas and perspectives.

Europarties are easily perceived as being part of the ‘Brussels bubble’ that should do more to reach out to civil society and citizens (Van Hecke et al., 2018). Europarties have introduced membership for individuals, but in her pioneering study, Hertner (2019) showed that Europarties had only very small numbers of individual members, with national member parties often against giving individual members stronger participation rights. Europarties face the challenge of scale: even democratic innovations such as deliberative panels or various online platforms cannot bring all citizens or party members across Europe together. Here the CoFoE would seem a good opportunity for involving the Europarties’ grassroots

members: it is, at least according to the official declarations and documents, dedicated to listening to Europeans, not least through setting up various citizens' assemblies and other consultation mechanisms.

Pulling the various threads of our theoretical framework together, we put forward three propositions that guide our empirical analysis. First, it is worth reminding that the Europarties and their EP groups are not new to this game. Quite the opposite, they have decades of accumulated experience from building networks and coalitions in IGCs and inter-institutional bargaining rounds. Temporal dimension and experience are also identified in agenda-setting and MSF: 'Importantly, what emerges as a potential solution in response to the opening of a policy window is the result of prior advocacy for ideas and proposals by entrepreneurs, in particular their skill, persistence and resources in pushing particular project. For MSF applications to the EU, it is their ability to sell these ideas to policy makers in response to policy windows—and thereby couple the politics, problems and policy streams—that explains whether windows of policy opportunity actually result in policy change' (Ackrill et al., 2013, p. 880). This experience should work in the favour of Europarties and their EP groups.

Regarding the division of labour between Europarties and their EP groups, the agenda of CoFoE contains issues that are directly relevant for both actors. At the same time, the Conference is not designed as a formal IGC resulting in Treaty changes. Hence, the EP groups should be more prominent than the extra-parliamentary Europarties. The former are more present in the EU policy process, have considerable experience of direct inter-institutional bargaining, and also have substantially stronger resources.

Proposition 1: In setting the agenda of CoFoE, the EP political groups are the central partisan actors, with the Europarties in a more limited role.

Not only have the Parliament and its political groups considerable experience of constitutional reform processes, they also understand that parliamentary unity should help the EP in reaching its objectives. Therefore, we expect to see active collaboration between the main political groups that are used to building broad coalitions, with most plenary votes adopted by large majorities that often extend beyond the 'grand coalition' of EPP and S&D.

Proposition 2: The positions adopted by the Parliament on CoFoE are based on broad coalitions between the main political groups.

Turning to balance of power within the political groups, unlike in more day-to-day legislation where particularly rapporteurs and MEPs seated in the respective committees are influential in shaping group positions, we expect the group leaders to be the dominant actors. To increase the chances of the Parliament's voice being heard, the leaderships of the political groups should take an active role in guiding the issues through the Parliament and in expressing the positions of the EP and the political groups.

Proposition 3: Political group chairs take the leading role in articulating group positions and in guiding the issues through the Parliament.

EMPIRICAL ANALYSIS: BUSINESS AS USUAL FOR THE EP POLITICAL GROUPS

The empirical section consists of two parts. The first explores the rationale for the CoFoE and the involvement of Europarties and the EU institutions in setting its agenda. The second part focuses on political dynamics inside the Parliament and traces the contribution of the three Europarties and their EP groups.

The Road to the Conference

The 2010s was a turbulent decade for the EU, with both the Euro crisis and the refugee crisis revealing strong tensions between the member states and different political families. Brexit in turn fuelled concerns about the rise of Eurosceptical movements and the democratic legitimacy of integration. Several key figures—notably the French President Emmanuel Macron, German Chancellor Angela Merkel and the Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker—gave high-profile speeches that included initiatives for debates about the future of integration. The Commission proposed five scenarios for the future of Europe in March 2017, and this was crucial in triggering the subsequent reflections and concrete initiatives for reforming the EU.¹ The Juncker Commission also made active use of Citizens' Dialogues, first initiated by the Commission in 2012.² In September 2017, President Macron initiated citizens' consultations that were held in most member states during 2018.³ President of the EP Antonio Tajani invited the heads of state or government of EU countries to give their visions on the Future of Europe in the EP plenaries.⁴

In March 2019 Macron in an ‘open letter’ addressed to all Europeans specifically called for the establishment of a ‘Conference for Europe’ that should proceed ‘without taboos’ and be based on wide-ranging consultation with citizens and civil society actors.⁵ The European Council adopted the Sibiu Declaration, outlining ten commitments for the future of Europe.⁶ The Parliament continued its tradition of adopting resolutions in favour of both deeper integration and of increasing its own powers.⁷ MEPs surely felt relieved when turnout increased in the 2019 EP elections quite significantly to just over 50% and the predicted rise in Eurosceptical vote did not materialise, although a nationalist Identity and Democracy (ID) group was formed after the elections. In terms of agenda-setting, there clearly was in the aftermath of the crises a ‘policy window’ open for debates about the future of integration.

The EP did not appreciate the European Council ignoring the *Spitzenkandidaten* when choosing the candidate for the Commission President. But the candidate, Ursula von der Leyen, needed the majority of MEPs behind her. Thus, under the heading ‘A new push for European democracy’ in the guidelines for her Commission, von der Leyen expressed her commitment to a Conference on the Future of Europe:

I want citizens to have their say at a Conference on the Future of Europe, to start in 2020 and run for two years. The Conference should bring together citizens, including a significant role for young people, civil society, and European institutions as equal partners. The Conference should be well prepared with a clear scope and clear objectives, agreed between the Parliament, the Council and the Commission. I am ready to follow up on what is agreed, including by legislative action if appropriate. I am also open to Treaty change. Should there be a Member of the European Parliament put forward to chair the Conference, I will fully support this idea.⁸

The same guidelines stated that the CoFoE should address both the *Spitzenkandidaten* system and the introduction of transnational lists in EP elections. Not surprisingly, both items have long been on the agenda of both the Europarties and the Parliament. Particularly the *Spitzenkandidaten* mechanism has been defended by referring to fundamental values such as democracy and citizen participation. Von der Leyen further specified her thoughts on the Conference in the ‘mission letter’ to Dubravka Šuica, at that point the Vice-President-designate for Democracy and

Demography.⁹ Šuica is responsible for dealing with the Conference in the Commission.

In subsequent position papers, we can detect elements of both issue framing and venue shopping. On 26 November 2019, France and Germany published a paper that could be interpreted as trying to steer the process in a more intergovernmental direction and as an attempt to keep CoFoE more focused on policies instead of institutional questions.¹⁰ However, the joint contribution from France and Germany simultaneously gave a ‘strong push’ for CoFoE (Fabbrini, 2019, p. 6), offering legitimacy and highest level political support for the project amidst some more lukewarm receptions in member state capitals—and of course it was Macron who had initiated the whole Conference with his ‘open letter’. The European Council of December 2019 gave a mission to Croatian Presidency to prepare the Council position, underlining the need to focus on policies.¹¹ Also various interest groups intervened. For example, the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC) called for the inclusion of social and labour market issues on the agenda.¹²

On January 22, 2020 the Commission presented its Communication,¹³ according to which CoFoE should deal with policies and institutions. Regarding the latter, the Communication restated the need to re-examine the *Spitzenkandidaten* process and the idea of transnational lists. The Communication also expressed commitment to listening to Europeans through a variety of channels such as deliberative panels and digital platforms. While largely agreeing with the viewpoints of the Commission, critical voices among MEPs saw that the Commission was not as ambitious as the Parliament, both in terms of the format and outcome of CoFoE (see below).¹⁴ On the Council side, the General Affairs Council addressed the issue on 28 January, concluding that ministers ‘underlined the need to ensure a balanced representation of the three EU institutions and to fully involve national parliaments’.¹⁵ But after the COVID-19 crisis set in, there was mainly silence.

Throughout the process, there have been disagreements between the EU institutions (Parliament, Commission, Council) about the organisation of CoFoE, including who chairs it, its content, as well as whether it could result in Treaty changes. Even if the Conference manages to agree on ambitious reform proposals, implementing them can be difficult and Treaty change requires unanimity. The position of the Council has been decidedly more intergovernmental and ‘institutional’ than those of the Commission and the Parliament, with most governments against or at

least very hesitant about Treaty change and other binding outcomes.¹⁶ Also the Commission is hesitant about public commitments to Treaty reform. The Parliament, its political groups and also the Commission urged the Council to move ahead,¹⁷ and finally in early February 2021, it adopted its position.¹⁸ This paved the way for the joint statement of the three EU institutions adopted on 10 March, which outlined that CoFoE operates under the authority of the Joint Presidency (presidents of the EP, Council and Commission); has an Executive Board where the three institutions have three seats each (Guy Verhofstadt from Renew Europe is a co-chair of the board and the other two MEPs are Manfred Weber from EPP and Iratxe García Pérez from S&D); a Conference Plenary; a multilingual digital platform¹⁹; and citizens' panels organised nationally and by the EU institutions.²⁰ The Conference was officially launched on 9 May and is expected to reach conclusions by spring 2022.

Coalitions and Leadership in the Parliament

Turning to the Parliament, we can see from the beginning the EP trying to claim 'ownership' of the Conference. There has clearly been from the outset rather high interest in CoFoE among the MEPs. Significantly, the leaders of political groups have been strongly involved. The Conference of Presidents—the body responsible for organising Parliament's business that consists of the EP President and the chairs of the political groups—established a Working Group, with the Committee on Constitutional Affairs (AFCO) having the main responsibility for dealing with the matter. Chaired by EP President David Sassoli (S&D), the Working Group brought together representatives from the political groups, including Paulo Rangel (EPP), Gabriele Bischoff (S&D),²¹ Guy Verhofstadt (Renew Europe) and Antonio Tajani (EPP) in his capacity as the AFCO chair.²² AFCO did not appoint a rapporteur, as it did not issue a report, just the opinion mentioned below.

AFCO organised a public hearing on 4 December 2019 that featured a long list of speakers from EU institutions, academia and civil society.²³ AFCO adopted its opinion on 9 December but not before sifting through the 238 amendments tabled by the MEPs in the committee.²⁴ This was the only 'outreach' effort by AFCO, but interviews suggest that MEPs spread the word about CoFoE in different ways from engaging with civil society actors to blog texts to speaking about the Conference within their national parties or with colleagues from national legislatures.

The Working Group reported to the Conference of Presidents on 19 December, stating that the ‘note reflects the current consensus among a majority of the political groups on the scope, governance and outcome of the Conference’.²⁵ The fact that the preparations for CoFoE were overseen by the Conference of Presidents indicates the high salience of the topic in the Parliament—and is simultaneously also a signal for the other EU institutions that CoFoE deserves to be taken seriously.

The main contents of the Working Group paper were included in the subsequent EP resolution adopted on 15 January 2020.²⁶ The motion for the resolution was tabled by MEPs from all political groups with the exception of the two Eurosceptical groups, European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) and ID. On behalf of EPP it was signed by Manfred Weber, Paulo Rangel, Antonio Tajani and Danuta Maria Hübner; from S&D by Iratxe García Pérez, Gabriele Bischoff and Domènec Ruiz Devesa; and from Renew Europe by Dacian Cioloş, Guy Verhofstadt and Pascal Durand.²⁷ The plenary discussed the issue in the presence of Commissioner Šuica and the Council Presidency, with active input from across the political groups.²⁸ The debate reflected the broad partisan consensus, with the Eurosceptics adopting more critical positions.²⁹ After the debate and votes on 37 amendments, the Parliament adopted its rather detailed resolution with 494 votes to 147 and 49 abstentions. In the EPP group cohesion was 97.3%, in S&D 95.7% and in Renew Europe 95.5%.³⁰ Examining the composition of the Working Group and the actors involved in the Parliament, we note the presence of group leaders (Weber and vice-chair Rangel from EPP, García Pérez from S&D, and Cioloş from Renew) and other seasoned veterans (such as Verhofstadt) of inter-institutional bargaining.

Reflecting the positions of the Commission and the Council, the EP resolution highlighted listening to the citizens, identified a broad range of policies to be tackled and opined that ‘issues such as the lead candidate system and transnational lists should be taken into consideration’. According to the resolution CoFoE plenary should involve representatives from the Parliament, the Council, the Commission, national parliaments, the European Economic and Social Committee, the Committee of the Regions, as well as EU-level social partners. The Presidents of the EP, the European Council and the Commission should oversee the process and both a Steering Committee and the Executive Coordination Board should have representation from the Parliament, the Commission and the Council. The Parliament’s resolution did not hide the ambition of

the EP to lead the Conference. The next day the Conference of Presidents outlined the composition of the Executive Coordination Board for CoFoE, with MEPs from EPP, S&D and Renew Europe and representative each from the Council and the Commission. According to this plan Verhofstadt would be the CoFoE president, with Weber (EPP) and a representative of the S&D group as his deputies.³¹

Turning to the activities of the three Europarties and their EP groups, the latter produced more public material, indicating again the strong presence of the Parliament in the process. CoFoE, or anything related to it, did not feature in the programmes or the resolutions of the Europarty congresses held in 2019. While the PES congress took place already in February in Madrid (and thus before the open letter of Macron), the congresses of ALDE (Athens, October) and EPP (November, Zagreb) were organised well after the initial plans for CoFoE had been laid out.³² The Europarty ALDE had made plans prior to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic about organising events involving member parties and individual party members to collect and shape ideas feeding into CoFoE. In November 2020, ALDE council issued a rather detailed position paper on CoFoE, recommending a series of concrete changes to how the EU institutions work—and that after CoFoE, ‘a European Convention should be convened in order to implement necessary treaty adjustments’.³³ ALDE has also stated that it ‘will, in the second half of 2021, organise its own Conference on the Future of Europe’.³⁴

Regarding the political groups, the EPP group issued a brief general press release coinciding with the adoption of the EP resolution, with Rangel, the group vice-chair in charge of preparing CoFoE, basically just summarising the planned agenda and format.³⁵ Coinciding with the report of the parliamentary Working Group, S&D in its press release emphasised the need to engage with citizens, with Bischoff arguing that ‘S&D Group has led the way in citizen engagement in recent years, with a bottom-up approach to regular debate and conversations with local people all over Europe. We must have citizens and civil society at the heart of the Conference on the Future of Europe’.³⁶ S&D organised a streamed event in Brussels titled ‘The Political Vision of the EU’s Constitutional Future’ on 6 February 2020, with representatives from EU institutions, FEPS, civil society actors (including ETUC) and academics among the speakers.³⁷ In December 2020, the S&D group adopted its strategy on CoFoE, specifically emphasising diversity and the need to ‘approach

in particular those that are more excluded from the usual communication campaigns, to rebalance the perception of the European institutions targeting only a particular group of citizens, while remaining attractive for active citizens in European organisations, trade unions' leaders, academics, students'.³⁸ The Renew Europe group issued a press release coinciding with the EP resolution, claiming that the 'resolution adopted includes most of the proposals from the Renew Europe group and its negotiators Guy Verhofstadt (Open-VLD, Belgium) and Pascal Durand (Renaissance, France)'.³⁹ Another press release the day after stated that 'Renew Europe put forward the proposal on the Conference on the Future of Europe and I am delighted our family will play a central role in driving it', referring to the proposed leading role of Verhofstadt.⁴⁰

Turning to the political foundations, they organised various events, even together, and produced a steady stream of publications, often drawing on academic expertise, that either directly dealt with CoFoE or more generally with the future of Europe and institutional questions. Most of the interaction between political foundations, Europarties and the EP groups is informal and active, with overlap in terms of personnel, and this also applied to the preparatory stages of CoFoE. Party-political links between the Parliament and the Commission were strong, and the positions of the two institutions were broadly congruent.

CONCLUDING DISCUSSION

This chapter has analysed the involvement of the Europarties and particularly their EP groups in the agenda-setting stage of the Conference for the Future of Europe. In line with our first proposition, we detected very limited input of the Europarties, whereas the main EP political groups, acting together and drawing on their collective experience from previous rounds of constitutional reform, displayed active interest and also influence. As one of our interviewees explained, Europarties become more prominent in intergovernmental processes (such as IGCs), while in supranational, inter-institutional bargaining the EP groups are strongly engaged. These types of constitutional processes are 'business as usual' for the Parliament and its main groups, and, referring to values such as democracy and representation, they have proven successful in proactively shaping the agenda of inter-institutional reforms. To be sure, the EP does not always reach its objectives (Héritier et al., 2019), and the same may well apply to CoFoE. Venue matters also, and hence there were

disagreements between the Council and the Parliament about both who chairs CoFoE and its eventual organisation. But there is no denying the influence of the EP groups during the early stages of CoFoE.

Confirming our second proposition, inside the Parliament the usual pattern of coalition-building was evident, with the pro-EU centrist groups aligning together and the Eurosceptics opposed to the EP positions. Parliamentary unity should facilitate bargaining success vis-à-vis the national governments, while the strong presence of political group chairs signals that the issue is of high salience for the EP. CoFoE clearly attracted broader interest in the chamber, but within political groups the role of group leaders was prominent, not least in terms of presenting and communicating group positions. Hence, during constitutional reform processes, the balance of power shifts towards group leaders, unlike in normal legislation where particularly rapporteurs and MEPs seated in the respective committees are influential in shaping group positions. This finding validates our third proposition. Our analysis also provided evidence of the strong partisan and institutional ties between the EP and the Commission, and of routine interaction between the Europarties, their EP groups and the respective political foundations.

In terms of agenda-setting, concerns about the democratic deficit and legitimacy of integration have been key drivers behind the increased powers of the EP (Rittberger, 2005), and the same themes appear in the framing of CoFoE by the Parliament and the Commission. One can also detect a built-in pro-EU bias in the agenda and format of CoFoE, although EU leaders have promised that all shades of opinions matter.⁴¹ Even before the Conference has been launched, it has attracted strong criticism on grounds of being too top-down and elitist, with particularly civil society actors calling for genuine dialogue with citizens, also during the crucial agenda-setting stage.⁴² Indeed, our analysis shows that the Europarties and their EP groups hardly attempted to reach out to the citizens and grassroots party members. Beyond some press releases and events organised by political foundations, it was impossible to detect any engagement with civil society actors. National member parties in turn seemed rather ignorant of CoFoE. Obviously, this might change after the Conference kicks off, but we have underlined the importance of agenda-setting as it strongly guides the debates in CoFoE. In terms of agenda-setting literature, this implies that the 'political agenda' (the interests of the actual policy-makers) predominated at the expense of the 'public agenda'.

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