CHAPTER 2

Set up: The European Parliament

Abstract Prior to conducting any research, it is crucial to understand and familiarise oneself with the research context and setting. The chapter provides an overview of the existing research on the European Parliament and its political groups, as well as key information on the Parliament as a setting for qualitative research. Following the step-by-step approach of the book, Chapter 2 provides the readers with key preliminary insights about the European Parliament with regard to conducting qualitative research. It engages with key concepts in qualitative research on parliaments and discusses them in light of the uniqueness of the European Parliament. Specifically, the cultural and linguistic diversity and its highly technical legislative process and complex institutional context make the European Parliament a rich albeit challenging site of qualitative research. The chapter stresses the high level of informality in the parliamentary work of the European Parliament and highlights the contributions qualitative research makes to a field still largely dominated by quantitative research. The study of everyday dynamics and informal practices reinforces the importance of utilising a qualitative toolkit and data, like interviews and ethnography, and that of broadening the range of research participants to parliamentary staff from political elites only.

Keywords European Parliament · Political groups · Informality · Institutional context · Research context

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V. Berthet et al., *Guide to Qualitative Research in Parliaments*,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-39808-7_2

Introduction

The initial stage of most research is to gain familiarity with the context and the setting—acquainting yourself with previous research findings, establishing what is known about it thus far and discerning where the knowledge gaps might be. Covering these various aspects of the existing literature is a fundamental building block of research as it helps to: (a) defend and explain one's own research focus and topic; (b) pinpoint what is already known and what might be missing; (c) compare and contrast the empirical findings to the ones that have already been made elsewhere and (d) draw preliminary conclusions about theoretical, conceptual, methodological and empirical contributions. These steps are very much the backbone of any thesis or scientific article—nothing frustrates and disappoints reviewers more than an evidently untrue claim that a subject has not been researched before.

The questions we wanted answered in relation to this initial scene-setting phase, included how the European Parliament was working within a wider frame of reference, and what it meant for our qualitative research. For us, parliament was the larger field; within which the gendered practices, processes and outputs of political groups were situated. Our main research site was thus the European Parliament located in Brussels and Strasbourg and its informal adjacent spaces. As a research group, we spent the first years in a fortnightly reading group sharing and discussing the existing research on the parliament, and in particular the political groups. This chapter introduces the valuable insights that a first research step like this generates.

What Kind of Parliament?

There are many good books about the European Parliament (Corbett et al., 2016; Ripoll Servent, 2018), specialised journal articles and even publications about specific aspects of the European Parliament (Whitaker, 2011; Yordanova, 2013). Of greater significance to us, was an edited volume on gendering the European Parliament that we had contributed to, as well as journal articles and book chapters about the gendered character of how the parliament functions (Ahrens & Rolandsen Agustín, 2019). Our specific angle was to focus on the political groups of the parliament from a gender perspective. Understanding our research setting, meant familiarising ourselves with the actors and structural cleavages within and between the political groups in the parliament. Interestingly, prior to our edited volume, there were no books that covered the full spectrum of these political groups (Ahrens, Elomäki & Kantola, 2022), and certainly no books on political groups and gender. There were, however, a lot more articles and book chapters on political groups than we had anticipated.

One pertinent characterisation when undertaking qualitative research on parliaments is to distinguish between a *debating parliament* and a *working parliament* (Lord, 2018; Tiilikainen & Wiesner, 2016). In contrast to the UK House of Commons which is commonly depicted as a classic chamber focused on debating (see, e.g. Miller, 2021, 2022a, b), the European Parliament is most often characterised as a committee-focused working parliament. Undoubtedly, these are very specific examples and all parliaments have characteristics of both types, arguably both are vital for a functioning parliamentary democracy, yet such distinctions can serve as pointers to why certain factors might be seen as particularly important to research participants. Whilst committees form the basis of policy work in a working parliament, understanding how power works demands being attentive to policy leadership positions such as rapporteurs, coordinators and committee chairs. The notion of a working parliament implicitly suggests that parliamentary majorities and coalitions are policy specific and flexible, as opposed to being fixed and centralised in debating parliaments (Miller, 2022a, b). Consensus and coalition building, trust and networking have been shown to be important in the European Parliament in a number of studies. Despite this, the influx of radical-right populists, Eurosceptics and anti-gender politicians brings in actors who disrupt the logics that prioritised the plenary as a main site of their action, and who are dismissive, or closed off from, traditional political dynamics (see, e.g. Brack, 2018; Kantola & Miller, 2021; Kantola & Lombardo, 2021).

There has been a long-standing debate about the uniqueness of the European Parliament relative to national parliaments (Hix et al., 2007). After the significant increase and solidification of its legislative and budgetary powers, as well as its important scrutiny functions, the debate has to some extent been settled. Suffice it to say, the European Parliament is surely as powerful, if not more powerful, than national parliaments, even if it still lacks the right to initiate legislation. This does not, however, mean that unique features are somewhat lacking. On the contrary, its distinctive characteristics make both working in, and researching, the parliament interesting and more challenging than doing similar research at the national level.

With 705 Members of the European Parliament (MEPs), the parliament is relatively big (for comparisons to other parliaments see De Feo & Jacobs, 2021). More significantly, MEPs come from 27 member states, variant political parties and speak 24 official languages. The parliament's multilingual character, and the translation practices that have developed around it, is indeed one of its most unique characteristics (Bartlomiejczyk, 2020; Ringe, 2022). The parliament is also multicultural and constitutes an amalgamation of 27 national political traditions and as many gender regimes. In this respect, some political groups such as the European People's Party (EPP), possess 176 MEPs, which makes them larger than some national parliaments. Yet, the parliament is very homogenous when it comes to differences other than the gender with only 3 per cent of MEPs representing people of colour (Kantola et al., 2023).

The European Parliament is also unique because of the highly technical nature of the legislation that it deals with, and the complexity of the institutional context—the interinstitutional relations to the Council and the Commission—in which it is embedded (Christiansen et al., 2021: 484). The challenges for MEPs' work are well known: the European Parliament is a co-legislator together with the Council, and it engages primarily with Commission's proposals, yet MEPs have far fewer staff at its disposal, and is heavily reliant on external experts and lobbyists. Whilst MEPs can delve deeper into matters that they are either responsible for as rapporteurs, shadows, committees chairs or members, they simply cannot familiarise themselves with all the technical details relating to every vote and report. Instead, they are given voting lists and tend to follow these on most matters. Taken together, this places unique challenges of complexity for both working and researching in the parliament.

The European Parliament is governed by Rules of Procedure that have been frequently amended. As a research project, we spent extended periods reading these rules and discussing them along with some excellent articles tracing the significance of rule changes in the parliament (Brack & Costa, 2018a, b; Kreppel, 2002). It was soon apparent that the European Parliament is extensively self-regulated. It was interesting to discover that the Parliament completely determined its procedures by being in charge of its own rules, and the regularity with which they had been changed. Moreover, how these changes reflected shifts in the power of the parliament—with the direction of travel revealing a trajectory which bestowed greater power to political groups, at the expense of individual MEPs (Brack & Costa, 2018a). Within this shift of power, we also found out that many issues were not governed by the rules, or if they were it was ambiguous, leaving their interpretation open to the political groups or informal rules and agreements.

The high level of informality in terms of informal practices and institutional processes suggests that qualitative research, using interviews and ethnography, is likely to be better suited to revealing what is going on beyond the formal rules (see Box 2.1 and Box. 2.2 below). Other scholars, in what constituted a turn to informal politics and micropolitics, used these methods and approaches to bring new insights to a field traditionally dominated by quantitative studies of voting patterns and formal rules (Brack, 2018; Busby, 2013; Landorff, 2019; Ripoll Servent, 2018; Ripoll Servant & Panning, 2019; Wiesner, 2018, 2019). To tap into this, we draw heavily on Feminist Institutionalism as a theoretical and methodological approach to define ‘formal’ and ‘informal’ institutions, the relations between them and their significance for societal change (Waylen, 2017; Chappell and Mackay, 2017). Feminist institutionalism does not rest content with simply the analytical relationships between formality and informality but enables making deeper excursions into rules. Used in this way, it has been able to get a more nuanced reading of the ‘everyday’ dynamics of parliaments (Miller, 2021).

Box 2.1 Political Groups Formation

Whilst the powers of the European Parliament increased, little research was devoted to the formation of the political groups within it. With the political struggles of recent years and the rise of radical-right populism, a proper re-evaluation of the functioning and importance of political groups within the European Parliament was necessary. Drawing on 130 research interviews conducted with MEPs, political groups and parliamentary staff in 2018–2019 in the 8th and 9th parliaments, Ahrens and Kantola (2022) analysed precisely political group formation processes in the European Parliament. The findings stress the lack of formal rules in this prominent political performance and highlight the need to study informal practices. They found informal practices to be widespread in how groups come together. Group formation is shaped by the objective of maximising their size, sometimes at the expense of group unity. In turn, the negotiation of leadership positions varies across groups, with some using more standardised practices whilst others took decisions on a quasi-ad-hoc basis. Further, left-leaning groups tended to prioritise the objective of securing unified policy positions when forming their collective identity, whilst others emphasised the importance of common values at the expense of unified policy positions. On the other hand, radical-right populist groups placed greater emphasis on accommodating divergent national viewpoints and expressed a preference for open voting, without any motivation to increase policy coherence. The discussion underscores the need to understand political group formation not solely within the framework of the European Parliament but also in light of political dynamics at the group level—which dynamics are made visible by qualitative tools and methods.

For more, see Ahrens and Kantola (2022).

Box 2.2 Policy-Making Processes

Within the European Parliament's legislative process, political groups hold a crucial function. Scholars have given several accounts for the high degree of voting cohesion within groups, whilst few have explored the mechanism through which the groups arrive at their policy positions initially. Due to the internal heterogeneity of the groups, the negotiation of policy preferences within the groups become 'all the more relevant for supranational democracy' (Elomäki et al., 2022: 74). In the chapter 'Democratic Practices and Political Dynamics of Intra-Group Policy Formation in the European Parliament', Elomäki et al. (2022) ask how the groups formulate group lines and policy positions and what impact this dynamic has on democratic decision-making and intra-group democracy in the European Parliament. The findings indicate that political groups with greater ability to influence the position of the Parliament tend to formulate policy in a more centralised and hierarchical manner. For instance, the largest groups—namely the centre-left Group of the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats (S&D) and centre-right Group of the European People's Party (EPP)—placed great emphasis on having a unified group stance, with formal regulations requiring MEPs to support the group line. For the centre-right liberal Renew Europe and the Greens/European Free Alliance (Greens/EFA), a unified group line was essential, but unlike the two largest groups, not enforced through formal regulations. Groups on the left such as the Left Group (GUE/NGL) lacked formal rules and interviewees highlighted big differences between national party delegations due to the confederal nature of the group. Regarding eurosceptic parties, their formal regulations underlined that MEPs may vote 'as they see fit'. Amongst the formal and informal processes that influence democratic practices, Elomäki et al. (2022) point out how the formal rule of gender balance in groups is limited by informal rules of seniority, resulting in men being overrepresented. Moreover, the research points at an important dynamic; the role of political groups in policy-making is increasing, whilst the power of committee experts is decreasing. Notably, a handful of MEPs such as group leaders take key decisions in the group and leaders of large national party delegations are decisive actors. Elomäki et al. (2022) conclude that in the European Parliament, the pursuit of influence through a unified position can sometimes contradict the principles of inclusion, participation and deliberation, even in smaller groups. Such contradictions emerged from qualitative methodologies.

In addition to being a working parliament, the European Parliament could also be termed an 'equality parliament'—understanding the structures, processes and actors behind this has been central to our endeavour. Here, our challenge differed from getting a sense of the parliament as a working parliament. Some of our own previous research contributed to knowledge about the European Parliament as an equality parliament (see Kantola, 2010; Kantola & Rolandsen Agustín, 2016, 2019; Ahrens, 2016; Ahrens & Rolandsen Agustín, 2021; Warasin et al., 2019; Ahrens, Meier & Rolandsen Agustín, 2022), and as a consequence, this project has involved digging deeper and going beyond what we thought we already knew. The notion of the European Parliament as an equality parliament is built around several dimensions and includes, for example, the high numbers of women MEPs when compared to national parliaments (Aldrich & Daniel, 2020; Fortin-Rittberger & Rittberger, 2014; Lühiste & Kenny, 2016); well established feminist governance structures of the parliament including a Committee for Women's Rights and Gender Equality, an internationally rare strong commitment to gender mainstreaming (Ahrens, 2016, 2019; Elomäki & Kantola, 2022; Kantola & Lombardo, 2023; Elomäki & Ahrens, 2022); successes in defending gender policy, strengthening its provisions vis-a-vis the Council and the Commission; speaking out, not just for gender equality, but also for LGBTQI rights and anti-racism (Mos, 2018; Ahrens, Gaweda, & Kantola, 2022; Kantola et al., 2023).

Despite the increasing interest in, and number of scholarly articles about, political groups in the broader milieux of the European Parliament, we were quickly able to identify notable gaps. Some of these could be explained by the fact that political groups were considered as actors within the formal landscapes of working and equality parliaments, rather than as scenes or stages for policy-making and politics, including feminist politics, and as more coherent wholes whilst voting and submitting amendments. Academic research had been able to tell whether they were cohesive, and how well they built coalitions, but what we were interested in was the 'intra-group' dynamics of the political groups. What kind of stages did they occupy for the daily work of their MEPs and staff? What norms and structures governed them when they were formed, when they formulated policy and took decisions? What were the political cultures of each group? What was the significance of national delegations and political parties, did some delegations dominate over others? Moreover, how were all of these norms and structures gendered, and how did that impact the effectiveness of political work? Eventually, answers to such questions helped us to disaggregate the parliament's equality reputation to reveal the reality of gendered inequalities, the diverging ways of advancing gender perspectives and policy at the political group level (see, e.g. Ahrens, Gaweda, & Kantola, 2022; Elomäki, 2021; Kantola, 2022) and the parliament's reputation as a working parliament on the basis that political groups had widely different practices in policy-making (Elomäki et al., 2022; Elomäki & Gaweda, 2022) (see Box 2.3 below).

Box 2.3 Gendered Leadership

The issue of gender equality as both a norm and a policy question is a highly politicised and contested topic in the European Parliament. The political groups of the European Parliament are sharply divided in their support and promotion of gender equality, with one-quarter represented by radical-right populists who firmly oppose gender equality norms and express their dissent both directly and indirectly in plenary debates. In the chapter ‘Gender-related leadership in the political groups of the European Parliament’, Kantola and Miller (2022) contribute to the discussion on gender in the European Parliament by focusing on how leadership positions provided by political groups fail to provide equal opportunities for MEPs. The study draws on a large sample of interviews (n = 123) with MEPs and staff, covering political, policy and administrative leadership within political groups during the 8th (2014–2019) and 9th (2019–2024) legislatures. The research shows that despite the European Parliament’s reputation for gender equality, men still dominate political leadership. The leadership of national party delegations (NDPs) contains hidden gendered structures, with significantly fewer women in leadership positions. In addition, although policy leadership (i.e. committee chairs and coordinators) is relatively gender-balanced, the Group of the European People’s Party (EPP) is an exception in this matter. Despite progress, gendered norms and practices still limit the scope of action within leadership positions, highlighting the challenges of achieving gender equality in the European Parliament. Kantola and Miller (2022) reveal that women are underrepresented in administrative leadership roles, i.e. as Secretary Generals of political groups. Whilst administrative leadership positions are clear on paper, with nominally democratic voting within political groups, gender concerns are routinely overshadowed by power politics, trust networks and the prioritisation of seniority. The pivotal function of Secretary Generals has received limited scholarly attention. Thus, securing interviews with these key personnel allowed valuable insights on their role.

For more, see Kantola and Miller (2022).

One aspect of our research was to gather data, not only from MEPs but also from parliamentary staff. Christiansen et al. (2021) noted how under-researched the administrative dimensions of representative institutions have hitherto been. For them, this was problematic because the 'influence and effectiveness of democratic politics depends not only on the activity of elected members, but also on the kind of the administrative support upon which mandates can be reliably carried out' (Christiansen et al., 2021: 478). In the European Parliament, administrative support staff consists of various types. First, civil servants who work at the parliamentary level for committees, the secretariat, or the political groups, and second, there are the personal assistants (APAs, accredited personal assistants) of the MEPs. The latter are governed by different work contracts, norms and power relations. APAs, for example, are highly reliant on the MEPs who recruited them and are expected to be loyal to them (Pegan, 2017). The other administrative staff are expected to display political neutrality and institutional loyalty, despite often working in and for political groups. The high level of turn-over in European Parliament elections, close to 50 per cent, means that the parliamentary administration provides 'continuity and institutional memory for the legislature' (Christiansen et al., 2021: 478). We also found this to be the case with the Secretaries of General (SG) of the political groups, who played a pivotal role in the weeks following an election when political groups were formed and new MEPs took up their jobs (Ahrens & Kantola, 2022; Kantola & Miller, 2022).

Understanding the role of administrative staff is equally crucial for gender research. It fits well with the recent turn in gender and politics scholarship where parliaments have been understood as gendered workplaces (see Erikson & Verge, 2022). This scholarship has underpinned the idea that treating parliaments as special representative institutions outside the social norms and laws that govern normal working life, can be harmful for gender equality. By doing so, members of administrative staff, who are sometimes even more vulnerable than politicians, can be exposed to unchecked and unmonitored sexual harassment (see Miller, 2021; Berthet, 2022; Berthet & Kantola, 2021). Sexual harassment has been comprehensively documented as a deeply rooted problem in European parliaments, such as Westminster (Collier & Raney, 2018; Krook, 2018; Miller, 2021) and the European Parliament. Significantly, the position and counter-action by parliamentary staff in the European Parliament was absolutely crucial in tackling the issue (Berthet, 2022; Berthet &

Kantola, 2021). Indeed, it has been the personal assistants of MEPs, the APAs, who have played a key role in these struggles (Berthet, 2022). On a more general methodological level, interviewing those who seem to have less, little or no power can often reveal more about the exercise of power than those who have it.

A number of academic books and articles have been written about MEPs based on qualitative in-depth interviews with MEPs. This has a number of positives: it is clearly possible to undertake elite interviews with MEPs (e.g. Brack, 2018; Cullen, 2018; Kantola & Rolandsen Agustín, 2019; Sarikakis, 2003; Landorff, 2019; Daniel, 2015; Whitaker, 2011; Wodak et al., 2009) as well as participant observation and/or parliamentary ethnography in Brussels and Strasbourg (Abélès, 1992; Busby, 2013, 2014), of EU institutions more generally (Firat, 2019; Lewicki, 2016; Mérand, 2021; Shore, 2000) and MEPs in their constituency (Poyet, 2018). Slightly more negatively, the European Parliament's unique nature has been a challenging environment for qualitative interviews. Marc Abélès (1992) noted the difficulties of doing parliamentary work in the European Parliament, whilst some previous studies have only been based on relatively small numbers of MEP interviews. For example, Pauline Cullen (2018) interviewed six Irish female MEPs, Kantola and Rolandsen Agustín (2019) interviewed 18 female Danish and Finnish MEPs. In contrast, Landorff interviewed a healthy 42 MEPs (and 8 staff members) whilst Brack (2018) had a much larger sample of 101 Eurosceptics MEPs and 32 other MEPs and staff.

There are key challenges to carrying out qualitative interviews or parliamentary ethnography in the European Parliament. First, the parliament sits in many locations, most notably Brussels and Strasbourg, but also online during the Covid-19 pandemic; in the case of physical locations, researchers must be able to move between different places (De Feo & Jacobs, 2021). Second, the parliament is multilingual and one cannot assume interviews can be conducted in English, nor can translations be taken at face value; they can be political and meaning can easily be lost in the process (Bartlomiejczyk, 2020; Ringe, 2022). The multilingual character of the parliament can be even more challenging for parliamentary ethnographies and methods such as shadowing, where a MEP being shadowed can use languages not understood by the researcher (Miller, 2022a, b). Third, the parliament buildings are governed by a security system and can be entered only through security and accreditation, namely an invitation or study permit. More documentation, notably criminal records, is sought from researchers outside the Schengen area. Fourthl most MEPs are extremely busy, and time-pressured with their work, which makes eliciting interviews difficult (Busby, 2013; Sarikakis, 2003).

CONCLUSION

This chapter described the first stages of the research we undertook on the European Parliament's political groups. It consisted of understanding the research setting and context, which for us was getting to know the European Parliament, its political groups, actors and the cities of Brussels and Strasbourg. We have emphasised the importance of getting to know the intricacies of the research setting and how the existing literature had conceptualised and understood it. For us, it mattered that we fully grasped the powers and competences of the parliament, but more importantly, it mattered to understand the political cleavages and power dynamics of and between parliamentary actors. As a result, we saw the necessity to extend our focus beyond elected MEPs, to parliamentary staff and members of the administration, whose influence or expertise is less known, but whose knowledge of the parliament, practices and policies were critical to achieve a more nuanced account.

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