Democratic Practices and Political Dynamics of Intra-Group Policy Formation in the European Parliament

Anna Elomäki, Barbara Gaweda, and Valentine Berthet

Introduction

The political groups in the European Parliament (EP) play a key role in the European Union (EU) legislative process, as their main goal is to influence and pass legislation. The role of the political groups in making this process democratic has mainly been analysed in terms of party political competition *between* the groups on different policy agendas that matter to EU citizens as well as of how cohesively the groups support

A. Elomäki (✉) · B. Gaweda · V. Berthet
Tampere University, Tampere, Finland
e-mail: anna.elomaki@tuni.fi

B. Gaweda
e-mail: barbara.gaweda@tuni.fi

V. Berthet
e-mail: valentine.berthet@tuni.fi

these policies (Hix et al., 2007; Kreppel, 2002). Questions about democracy have not been extended to intra-group policy formation; thus, related democratic practices *within* the political groups remain a black box in the research on the EP.

EP political groups comprise numerous ideologically and culturally diverse national party delegations that are connected to political parties in the member states. Political groups differ from national political parties in terms of policy formation because they 'lack well-defined legislative agendas of their own' (Roger & Winzen, 2015, p. 392). Moreover, political group leadership does not possess 'well-defined, exogenous policy preferences independent of those formulated by their party colleagues' (Ringe, 2010, p. 58). Although scholars have provided various explanations for the high voting cohesion of the groups, only few have tried to solve another part of the puzzle—how the political groups reach policy positions in the first place (see Bressanelli, 2014; Ringe, 2010; Roger & Winzen, 2015). Owing to the internal diversity of the groups, how policy preferences are negotiated and aggregated within the groups is all the more relevant for supranational democracy.

Therefore, we ask how the political groups formulate group lines on policies and what impact this has on democratic decision-making in the EP and intra-group democracy. Building on feminist institutionalism and literature on intra-party democracy, we approach intra-group policy formation from the perspective of democratic practices—that is, formal and informal practices, hierarchies and norms related to inclusion, deliberation and transparency that influence whose voice is heard. Although earlier research has shown that policy formation practices differ between issues and fields, the purpose of this chapter is not to produce empirical data on a specific field or to compare different fields. Instead, we focus on providing an overview of the processes with a specific focus on the differences between the groups. Our analysis is based on an extensive interview data ($n = 135$) with Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) and staff from all political groups, on ethnographic fieldwork notes collected in the 8th (2014–2019) and 9th (2019–2024) legislatures and on the internal rules of the groups.

We argue that negotiations between the political groups are the tip of the iceberg of democratic policy-making in the EP. Inter-group political dynamics are preceded by intra-group struggles that in our view are as important for the democratic functioning of the EP as those between the groups. This chapter fills important gaps in the scarce

literature on intra-group policy formation, in particular regarding the differences between the political groups, and it nuances understandings of the political dynamics behind the political groups' varying degrees of cohesiveness.

We begin by reviewing extant research on the internal dynamics and policy formation within the political groups and then outline our theoretical approach on formal and informal democratic practices. The following section outlines our method and research material. The three empirical sections analyse the main aspects of the internal policy formation we identified. The first looks at the importance of a unified group line and the modes of deciding on the group line, the second examines structures and processes of internal policy formation and the third zooms in on power hierarchies and key actors.

The Hidden Politics of Policy Formation in the European Parliament

Most research on EP policy processes has focused on coalition building between the political groups (Finke, 2012; Ripoll Servent, 2015; Roger et al., 2017) or negotiations between the EP and the Council (Bressanelli & Chelotti, 2018; O'Keeffe et al., 2016; Ripoll Servent & Panning, 2019). Less attention has been paid to intra-group dynamics and processes, where the conflicting interests of national party delegations and other different viewpoints are condensed into group positions on legislation and into amendments and voting lists.

Research on the internal dynamics of the political groups has centred on group cohesion, analysed based on publicly available voting records (Hix et al., 2007; Lindberg, 2008; Warasin et al., 2019). EP groups are relatively cohesive, despite the lack of formal party discipline, with increasing cohesion over time at least for the main groups (Hix et al., 2007). Groups with numerous smaller national delegations and those with niche parties having lower propensity to compromise tend to be less cohesive (Whitaker & Lynch, 2014). Conversely, national party delegations have been shown to have strong influence on the voting behaviour of their MEPs (Faas, 2003; Hix, 2002; Kreppel, 2002). Less is known about how the groups negotiate positions between the national party delegations and across other cleavages—a task requiring substantial fieldwork and interview material.

The scarce literature on intra-group negotiations stresses the centrality of committee-level procedures. According to Ringe (2010, p. 58), group positions on topical issues are not imposed from above but are elaborated by group members and staff appointed to the EP committees. When the position of the committee members is translated into a group position for the plenary, MEPs who do not have time or resources to be informed about all aspects of the policy tend to adopt the position of their expert colleagues. They first listen to the colleagues from their own national party delegation, if there are any in the responsible committee, and then to other group members (Ringe, 2010, p. 33). In particular, when the issue is perceived as controversial and intra-group conflict at plenary stage is expected, committee members involve MEPs from other committees in the course of forming the group line (Roger & Winzen, 2015). EP political groups have also created horizontal policy-making structures to enable cross-committee deliberation and manage the growing number of national delegations and the increased legislative workload in the EP (Bressanelli, 2014). The question remains, however, whose voices get heard and what power dynamics or hierarchies are at play.

Whereas Ringe (2010) argued that group lines are not imposed from above, others have suggested that group leaders are actively involved in policy formation. They ensure that voting instructions are acceptable to a majority of the group and enforce party discipline (Lindberg, 2008, pp. 1186–1187). The possibilities of leadership to shape the policy-making process might even have increased (Bressanelli, 2014, p. 789). Other influential 'policy leaders' (Kantola & Miller, 2022) include coordinators, the appointed spokespersons of the groups in committees and rapporteurs, who oversee specific files on behalf of the groups. Coordinators, for instance, are closely involved in formulating the group line and play a role in maximising group cohesion by leading discussions and disseminating information between the committee members and the wider group plenary (Daniel & Thierse, 2018, pp. 941, 958; Ringe, 2010; Roger & Winzen, 2015). However, detailed empirical research on the influence of leadership on the group line and on other power hierarchies that influence policy-making within the groups is missing.

Previous research has established that policy formation practices differ depending on the issue and the policy area. The internal process is more complex for politically controversial and salient issues, such as the strengthening of the EU economic governance after the Eurozone crisis (Roger & Winzen, 2015). Some fields such as gender equality policy have

been shown as particularly divisive within the groups (Berthet, 2021; Elomäki, 2021; Kantola & Rolandsen Agustín, 2016; Warasin et al., 2019). In this chapter, however, we turn our attention to a hitherto neglected topic, namely the differences between the political groups. The internal practices of the groups have been found to differ, with some working in more transparent, horizontal ways and others in more closed, hierarchical ways (Kantola & Miller, 2021; Ahrens and Kantola in this volume).

Formal and Informal Democratic Practices in Policy-Making

We see intra-group policy formation as an essential aspect of the democratic legislative process at the EU level and of the democratic functioning of the EP. Extant literature on political groups and democracy has tended to examine party-political competition between the groups (Hix et al., 2003, 2007) or the links between the political groups and the electorate (Hellström, 2008; Lindberg et al., 2008; Rasmussen, 2008). Accordingly, the democratic functioning of the EP and the democratic legitimacy of EU governance has been connected either to the ideological and redistributive conflicts between the groups (Hix et al., 2007) or to their ability to transmit citizens' interests (Lindberg et al., 2008). Nevertheless, if democracy involves party competition and representation of voters' interests, then in the EP, where political groups comprise the multiple interests of national delegations, intra-group processes are pertinent to the democratic functioning of the EP as well. We suggest that intra-group policy formation is a black box in the democratic legislative process of the EP, obscure yet essential to the process.

Our chapter steers away from the emphasis on party competition and links to voters towards *democratic practices*. We explore intra-group policy formation by focusing on processes, practices, norms and hierarchies. Literature on democratic practices in policy-making—within political parties and in general—has emphasised the role of transparency, participatory practices, inclusion of different voices, public deliberation and the possibility to express opinions and dissenting views (Cross & Katz, 2013; Wolkenstein, 2016). Drawing on feminist institutionalism, as one of the branches of new institutionalism (e.g. Mackay et al., 2010; Waylen, 2017), we suggest that analysing the enactment of democratic practices

within the political groups requires attention to formal and informal rules, practices and processes (cf. Kantola & Miller, 2021).

Institutionalist scholars have pointed to the interplay between formal and informal institutions in shaping organisations and individuals' behaviours (Krook & Mackay, 2011; Waylen, 2017). Formal institutions refer to codified rules and procedures that are communicated and enforced through official channels—in our case, the statutes of political groups, for instance. Informal institutions refer to unwritten conventions and norms that are embedded in everyday practices and often taken for granted—in our case, for instance, power hierarchies that determine who is heard (Chappell & Waylen, 2013, p. 605; Helmke & Levitsky, 2004, p. 727).

Formal and informal institutions are interconnected. Informal norms and practices shape official rules but may also contradict or undermine them, as the resistance to formal gender equality rules has shown (Waylen, 2017). For instance, the formal rule of gender balance within groups is curtailed by informal rules of seniority, leading to an overrepresentation of men (Kantola & Miller, 2022). The interplay between formal and informal institutions is similarly pertinent to analysing democratic practices in relation to intra-group policy formation. Paying attention to informal rules and formal–informal dynamics allows us to study the interplay between key actors, institutional norms and the 'rules of the game' within the political groups. It also allows us to see how informal power hierarchies and practices may subvert formal rules and support or undermine democratic practices.

Material and Method

The research material comprises 135 interviews conducted with MEPs, political group staff and EP administration (collected 2018–2021). Our data also include ethnographic fieldwork notes and political group statutes. We analysed all the groups represented in the 8th and 9th parliamentary terms: the Group of the European People's Party (EPP); the Group of the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats in the European Parliament (S&D); Renew Europe, formerly the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE); the Group of the Greens /European Free Alliance (Greens/EFA); the European Conservatives and Reformists Group (ECR); the Left Group in the European Parliament (GUE/NGL); the Identity and Democracy Group (ID), formerly

the Europe of Nations and Freedom Group (ENF); and the Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy Group (EFDD), dissolved after the 2019 elections. We coded the interviews and fieldwork notes with Atlas.Ti in a deliberative team process, in which we developed the codes deductively and inductively. The topic of intra-group policy formation occurred directly in some interviews and fieldwork notes but became mainly visible through a meta-analysis of codes. Therefore, we compared and analysed our code outputs for 'political group internal policy formation', 'democratic practices' (for political groups), 'group meeting', 'national party delegation', 'political group organisation' as well as the 'rapporteur' and 'coordinator' codes.

We take a fine-grained and systematic approach to examine our research data (interviews, fieldwork notes and political group documents) with the aim of contributing to the understanding of policy formation processes in the EP at the political group level. We aim to provide a careful description and analysis that explore the interrelated processes of policy-making in the EP. Our analysis followed three interdependent steps. First, we analysed political group statutes to determine formal practices with regard to policy formation. Second, we conducted a thorough reading of the coded material separately for each political group to analyse informal practices. Our main interest was in how the interviewees described and constructed the processes of internal policy formation, and the fieldwork notes were used as background information. Our analysis was guided by questions about formal and informal processes, practices and norms of policy-making and about hierarchies and power relations shaping decision-making practices and processes. Third, we explored the subtext and context of the interview statements and fieldwork notes and what insights they provided to compare formal and informal policy formation and decision-making practices within the political groups.

The subsequent analysis is divided into three sections. First, we assess how the political groups see the importance of being united, how they tolerate dissent and how they make decisions about the group line. Next, we look in more detail at the processes and arenas of forming the group line. Finally, we turn to the actors and analyse the power relations and hierarchies, in particular the role of group leaders, coordinators and big national delegations in establishing and enforcing the group line.

Unified Group Line and Modes of Decision-Making

Political groups have different understandings of the importance of a unified group line and different methods for deciding on the group line. We suggest that based on their formal and informal practices, the groups can be divided into three categories in terms of the importance of a unified group line. In addition, the groups' modes of decision-making range from emphasising majority voting to achieving consensus through deliberation. In a given case, the importance of the group line and the mode of decision-making may depend on the salience and controversiality of the issue (cf. Roger & Winzen, 2015). Other factors, such as the group leadership or power-seeking by the political groups in the EP, influence these practices too.

The Importance of a Unified Group Line

For the two biggest groups, the centre-left S&D and the centre-right EPP, a unified group line was very important. The EPP statutes stated that '[m]embers commit themselves to support, as a rule, the Group line during votes; however, they have the right to vote according to their conscience and political convictions' (EPP, 2013) (see also Bressanelli in this volume). This clause allows value-conservative MEPs to deviate from the group position on issues such as sexual and reproductive health rights or on LGBTIQ+ issues. The formal rules of the S&D allow dissent from majority decisions only when members can justify 'serious political reasons' (S&D, 2014).

Unity was constructed as important in the interviews too. The S&D interviewees typically described their group as homogeneous; in particular, social issues and equal rights were described to be 'in their DNA' and a 'core value' (Interviews 1; 2; 3). The S&D valued unity also for political reasons, in the search of power over other groups: 'to have a decisive impact, our group acts united. Then we can make a difference. If we allow ourselves to be split in key questions, then we of course have issues and we are less effective' (Interview 1). Although the EPP interviewees described their group as heterogeneous and divided, mentioning the freedom to vote against the group line (Interview 30), they too held unity as important for the influence of their group in the EP. As put by one interviewee: '[g]roup unity is at the forefront of everything we do.

Our group is becoming more divided, we're splitting quite obviously, you can see that in the numbers, but still the ultimate pursuit is group unity' (Interview 19).

For the centre-right liberal Renew Europe (formerly ALDE) and the Greens/EFA,[1] the group line was important. Unlike the two biggest groups, they did not enforce unity through formal rules. The Greens/EFA statutes explicitly allowed '[s]plit votes and separate votes (…) requested by any one member' (Greens/EFA, 2020, p. 10). Nevertheless, the Greens/EFA interviewees particularly stressed the importance of unity. They often reiterated the high cohesion of their group and constructed unity as *sine qua non* for acquiring 'a Green line' (Interviews 4; 5; 6). The Renew interviewees said unity enabled their group to act as 'kingmakers' in the 9th EP (Interview 43), but at the same time the group had to accommodate 'ideological wings' and opposing views on particular policy issues (Interview 23).

In comparison to the groups mentioned above, a unified group line was less important for the left GUE/NGL and for radical right groups. The GUE/NGL does not have formal rules, but the interviewees described 'big big big differences' between delegations (Interview 7). They stressed the confederal nature of the group, whereby members' interests come before those of the group, which gives free hands during votes: '[I]t's basically everybody can do what they want. We are a confederal group' (Interview 9, see also Interview 8). Geopolitical differences were seen as explaining the split positions in the group: 'it can be divisive if you think that the positions of the Nordic left parties compared to the Portuguese Communists can be very different on certain aspects' (Interview 5).

The formal rules of the radical right Eurosceptic groups stated that members can vote 'as they see fit' (EFDD, 2017; ENF, 2015). Similarly, ID (formerly ENF) and EFDD (2014–2019) interviewees described their groups as national delegation–oriented, with no interest in speaking with one voice. In contrast, the formal rules of the 'respectable' radical right group ECR that participates in inter-group negotiations (McDonnell & Werner, 2019; Ripoll-Servent & Panning, 2019) stated the need for common policy positions (ECR, 2017, Art 3). Yet, the ECR interviewees described the ECR as a group where 'everything is about the delegations', which are guaranteed a free vote (Interview 10).

The possibility to express dissent can be seen as an important part of an open and democratic policy formation process. As a formal practice in

most groups, national party delegations or MEPs must notify coordinators and group leadership early on if they disagree with the group line. This way, communication is effective and divergent views can be accommodated. This practice was inscribed in the statutes of the EPP, S&D and ECR. The Renew (ALDE) interviewees referred to such a practice, but it was not institutionalised in their statutes (Interview 43). Formally, then, the political groups tolerated disagreement when it did not come as a surprise. The formal rules of the S&D and the Greens/EFA even provided for allocating parts of the speaking time of the group in the plenary for MEPs representing minority positions within the group to make space for diverging views (Greens/EFA, 2020, p. 10; S&D, 2014, Rule 40).

For the Greens/EFA, unity and values were important, and dissent rarely emerged owing to the homogenous character of the group (see Ahrens and Kantola in this volume). In the radical right groups and GUE/NGL, where pressure for unity was low or non-existent, different views were tolerated in everyday practices. For instance, one ECR interviewee was adamant that no MEP was ever 'punished for stepping out of line' (Interview 42). In contrast, dissenting MEPs were sometimes an issue for the biggest groups striving for unity to gain political influence. Based on our interview material, dissent was sometimes poorly handled in the S&D—for instance, when some delegations voted against the group line on the LGBTI resolution. Whereas some saw that the ensuing discussion turned into 'insulting the members that didn't follow the group line' for national reasons (Interview 33), others felt that on such a 'core issue', there should not have been room for dissent and that the group and the group leader should have enforced the group line (Interview 2).

The biggest groups had different informal practices to side-line dissenting views. In particular, the EPP interviewees indicated there was little room for dissenting voices on key issues, with a general expectation not to 'rock the boat' (Interview 18). In the EPP, disagreements were kept behind closed doors rather than discussed at group meetings, often for strategic reasons. An informal practice of shutting down dissenting voices in relation to gender equality policy—a topic causing significant resistance within the group—included lining up speakers in favour of a proposal to give the impression of wide support (Interview 19). Some informal practices to exclude dissenting voices extended to the plenary. For instance, S&D national delegations with diverging views on economic policy were asked not to vote in the plenary to give the impression of

unity: '[i]t happens that I ask, some Maltese or Cyprus guys or even UK, to go and have a piss when we will have the vote because, to avoid that they vote against the line of the group' (Interview 20). This informal practice undermined the formal rule of the groups about accommodating minority views.

Modes of Decision-Making

Clear differences are also observed between the groups in terms of how group lines are defined. In most groups (EPP, S&D, Renew/ALDE, Greens/EFA and ECR), the formal rule was to decide on the group line through simple majority voting (ALDE, 2009; ECR, 2017; Greens/EFA, 2020; S&D, 2014, Rule 35–38). In the radical right groups, the ENF (Art 4) and EFDD (Art 2), formal rules required complete unanimity between delegations, making group lines possible only if all delegations agreed. The GUE/NGL does not have formal rules, but based on the interviews, it makes decisions based on a 'consensus principle' that similarly requires the agreement of all delegations. Informally, however, different understandings of democratic practices in groups, such as the role of deliberation, the importance of national delegations and the concerns for effectiveness, shaped the formulation of group lines.

The groups that had a formal rule about majority voting significantly differed in terms of how often issues were put on vote and what kind of role was given to deliberation. The delegation-focused ECR strongly underlined the importance of voting so that the view of the majority could determine the outcome (Interviews 10; 42). Some interviewees mentioned, however, that the group discussed issues to convince everyone to vote together. In case of division, 'the spectrum of views (…), from the liberal conservatives to the more social conservatives, and also (…) national concerns' (Interviews 40; 41) would be heard. As merging national interests was never a goal for the ECR, deliberation did not aim to establish a group line but had rather served a communicative purpose.

At the other end of the spectrum, the Greens/EFA interviewees stressed the importance of deliberation. They emphasised 'consensus' and 'discussion' as principal modes of achieving the group line. Although not excluded, voting was rarely used and sometimes perceived as a sign of failure (Interviews 5; 15). As one Greens/EFA MEP reflected, 'we try not to vote too often and base our political line on a majority, but we try to find a consensus and we take a lot of time to do that and that can

be a little tiring from time to time' (Interview 15). In between these two extremes, the EPP, S&D and Renew (ALDE) valued—at least rhetorically—consensus and discussion as modes of internal decision-making, even if issues were often solved by voting (Interviews 16; 17).

Of the groups requiring unanimity among the delegations to establish the group line, the GUE/NGL valued deliberation. One interviewee talked of 'building convergence instead of common positions' (Interview 11). This often led to lengthy discussions and the absence of such positions. Whereas some GUE/NGL interviewees praised the consensus-oriented method as democratic (Interview 11), others considered it time-consuming and ineffective, often leading to the exclusion of the group from EP decision-making (Interviews 12; 13; 14). The ID (and its predecessor ENF) and EFDD bypassed common positions, as each national delegation made decisions individually.

The above differences between the groups imply varying perspectives on what constitutes democratic decision-making in intra-group policy formation (cf. Cross & Katz, 2013). This was also reflected in the interviews. Interviewees from all the political groups described their own policy formation practices as democratic. For instance, the ECR and ID (ENF) interviewees especially said they were 'very democratic' or 'the most democratic in parliament'. Nevertheless, the ECR understood democratic policy-making as the rule of majority, and for the ID (ENF), the freedom of the national party delegations was the prime facet of democracy. In contrast, the interviewees from the Greens/EFA, GUE/NGL, S&D, Renew (ALDE) and EPP considered internal deliberation as a marker of democracy, focusing on voicing and discussing opinions to reach consensus rather than determining it via a vote.

STRUCTURES AND ARENAS OF GROUP LINE FORMATION

Because political groups comprise numerous national party delegations, the ways of reconciling the different views of these delegations into one group line are important. In the 8th and 9th parliamentary terms covered by our research, most groups had a three-tier structure in place (see also Bressanelli, 2014). Policy issues were first discussed by *committee working groups* that brought together MEPs and staff assigned to a given committee, then by *horizontal working groups* bringing together different committees, and finally by *group plenaries* attended by all members debating the policy. This arrangement allowed groups to identify and

solve conflicts early on and to ensure that policy positions adopted by different committees met the general group line. Such three-tier structures did not exist in radical right Eurosceptic groups ID (ENF) and EFDD, which did not aim for a group line. For these groups, the group plenary and the bureau constituted the main decision-making arenas.

According to our interviews, the committee level remained a key arena for deliberation over new issues and for solving intra-group differences (Ringe, 2010). In particular, the S&D interviewees emphasised the importance of a 'bottom-up approach' (Interview 1) and 'subsidiarity' (Interview 21) in terms of giving committee experts the lead. Some explicitly rejected the idea that the group 'tries to tell the [committee] working groups what to do' (Interview 1).

Our research material indicates, however, increasing political group authority in policy-making as opposed to the power of committee experts. The horizontal working groups, often led by the vice-presidents of the group and thus directly linked to group leadership, were portrayed as increasingly important for policy formation. They act as an 'early warning system' for intra-group conflicts, enabling upstream settlement (Interview 43). They are also a place where policy-related decisions are prepared. The EPP, Renew (ALDE) and S&D interviewees described horizontal working groups as the main arena for political debate where most controversial issues were solved and decisions were made (Interviews 20; 22; 23). The ALDE statutes explicitly specified that decisions on amendments, reports and voting lists are to be made in horizontal working groups (ALDE, 2009). In contrast, in the Greens/EFA, ECR and GUE/NGL, horizontal working groups were more recent (see Miller in this volume for the Greens/EFA) and somewhat less significant for policy formation.

Accordingly, the group plenary has become less important for policy formation, in particular for the larger political groups. Although the formal rules of the groups describe group plenary as 'the highest political authority' (S&D, 2014) that 'take[s] decisions on all political matters' (EPP, 2013), in practice, all of the biggest groups limit policy discussions in group plenaries. Oftentimes, a file is sent to group plenaries only if working groups failed to agree or if a fundamental issue was at stake (Interviews 20; 24; 25; 26). The EPP interviewees in particular saw group plenaries as too big to solve conflicts and make decisions efficiently. They described the policy-related discussions in group plenaries as focused on 'irrelevant things' (Interview 27) and the input as 'superficial' (Interview

19). In the consensus-seeking Greens/EFA and in the ECR, the group plenaries played a more important role (Interviews 15; 37).

The declining role of group plenaries sometimes caused conflicts. For instance, one Renew Europe group meeting we observed in 2020 descended into a 30-minute quarrel about whether decisions made in the working group could be opened in the group plenary or not (Fieldwork note 1). The diminishing significance of group plenaries, where all national delegations are present and which many interviewees described as a delegation-focused arena, could be interpreted as a power shift from the national delegations to the supranational level—even if big national delegations continued to dominate policy-making (see next section).

Our data also reveal a shift from a file-by-file approach (Ringe, 2010) towards a more strategic approach to policy formation in the form of position papers adopted at the group level. Particularly in the EPP and S&D, but also in other groups, position papers were seen as an important tool for solving internal differences and providing a backbone for intra- and inter-group negotiations (Interviews 16; 28; 29). Some interviewees saw position papers as a way to better integrate national delegations and individual MEPs in policy formation, which made the process more inclusive and increased acceptance. As explained by one S&D MEP:

> [T]his paper or position paper is […] the result or the product of the whole group's joint work. We have included the ordinary MEPs; we have included particularly the coordinators […]. So it was not just a top-down approach, not at all. […] It's taken four months but in the end it's a product of the whole group. And the positive side of this is that the members, they have, yeah, it's their baby at the same time and they accept it, and they defended it. (Interview 3)

We interpret the increasing significance of horizontal working groups and position papers as the rationalisation and centralisation of policy formation, which makes the groups more efficient and unified in inter-group negotiations across committees. This has both negative and positive consequences for democratic practices. On the one hand, the decision-making power of the group plenaries that in theory allow for everyone's equal and democratic participation has decreased in the bigger groups. As a consequence, transparency is reduced and MEPs must be proactive in finding out when and where relevant issues are discussed in order to have a say. On the other hand, horizontal working groups provide a new

deliberative forum and more opportunities to debate policy-related issues. They may make it easier for (active) MEPs from other committees to participate in the discussions and ensure their views are integrated into the group line. Whether these voices are heard, in particular when they contrast with the majority—or sometimes the loud minority—is another question.

Power Hierarchies and Actors Shaping the Group Line

In addition to the diverging importance of the group line and modes of decision-making and the structures for reconciling different views, our interviews showed the role of different actors in forming the group line, particularly that of the leadership. Whereas previous research found that group leaders can hardly impose a top-down decision-making approach on MEPs (Bressanelli, 2014; Ringe, 2010), our analysis showed that a handful of MEPs take key group decisions. This inner circle of decision-makers is constituted of group leaders (president and vice-presidents) and coordinators representing the interests of the group. Big national delegations and their leaders are decisive actors too. A set of formal and informal group practices contributed to how these actors exerted power. For instance, one EPP interviewee explained how some practices enforced hierarchy by establishing who gets to speak and in which order: 'in a group meeting, it's the chairman who is speaking. Then the vice president. Then the head of delegations. Then the coordinators, and at the end there's room for taking the floor for the normal MEPs. Those who don't have any extra function' (Interview 30).

From a democratic perspective, the power hierarchies matter and so do the mechanisms used to tip the balance when consensus is otherwise difficult to reach. In particular, group leadership—the president and vice-presidents—has the power to make their group *look like* it is united when searching for political power over other groups in the EP. Therefore, whereas the nature of the group (seeking unity or not) determines if the group speaks with one voice, that of its leadership (enforcing unity or not) determines if the group tolerates dissenting voices.

Our research material suggested that the leaders of the S&D and EPP were powerful because, as the two biggest groups in the EP, a clear group line was important to expand the political influence of the groups. Thus,

the leadership sought and enforced unity and sometimes shaped the position of the groups. In contrast, in the Greens/EFA, where consensus was typically sought through deliberation, the role of the leadership was limited to coordinate discussions (Interviews 4; 31). For the radical right groups ID (ENF) and EFDD, where the fair representation of national interests prevailed over group unity, the role of leadership was reduced to a minimum. This was well illustrated in the ENF, where each head of delegation was also a vice-president of the group (Interview 32). Here, the role of leadership was not to find consensus among competing national interests but to simply have those views represented at the top of the hierarchy.

An important way for group leadership to seek unity was to identify dissent and potential conflicts early on. Thus, the role of leadership was not to only solve disagreements but also to avoid their emergence. For instance, the S&D president monitored committee work to anticipate conflicts, solve disagreements and set priorities (Interview 33). Similarly, the S&D vice-presidents chaired horizontal working groups, enabling them to observe and powerfully shape policy-related decision-making across committees and act as conduits between the working groups and the leadership (Interview 21). In that sense, some of our S&D interviewees qualified their leadership as exercising an 'authoritative role' over difficult questions (Interview 34). Similarly, the Renew (ALDE) interviewees explained how group leadership is 'in charge' of defining a united position despite divergent opinions (Interviews 17; 36). Some MEPs experienced this as undemocratic—for instance, when the president would decide on a controversial issue in a group meeting without putting the issue to vote (Interview 34).

In some groups, the need to be perceived as united drove the leadership to act alone with little transparency towards the rest of the group. As one GUE/NGL interviewee explained: in a divided group, 'you need strong leadership (…) to say that now we just go on and do the decisions there' (Interview 35). Oftentimes, the leadership intervened, albeit undemocratically, when the group had to speak with one voice vis-à-vis others in the EP. For instance, although our analysis did not characterise the GUE/NGL as a group considering unity as important, the interviews suggested that when it was important to 'remain in the talks' with other EP groups, the president would take a decision on behalf of the group even if it went against 'the vast majority':

He [co-president] signed up [to the EP Brexit resolution] for the group, and then in the end only four people of the group out of 39 voted for it. […] If you sign on, you're taking it a bit more seriously and you remain in the talks; you want to remain in the talks but… it was not consensual at all and the group's name was used in a way that was contrary to the, the voting behaviour of the vast majority of the rest. (Interview 13)

Coordinators were key actors in making the groups perform as united on policy issues. They shaped policies and streamlined work between committees and the broader group in most groups. Coordinators' opinions on policy issues typically became the group line when no extraordinary controversies arose (Interviews 37; 38). In case of controversies in committees, coordinators were often the ones to decide (Interview 3). Interviewees from the largest groups noted how some coordinators controlled the content of reports through various informal practices and were prepared to 'shoot down' rapporteurs' views in front of the group (Interview 29). Smaller groups, such as the Greens/EFA and GUE/NGL, often left decisions about specific files to rapporteurs. In the radical right groups, which rarely participate in EP legislative policy-making and do not seek a group line, coordinators played a less influential role.

In addition, by selecting rapporteurs, coordinators could exclude dissenting voices and contain disagreements by allocating reports to loyal MEPs only (Interviews 20; 38; 39), which perpetuated a performative idea of group unity and influenced content. From a democratic perspective, coordinators' decision-making was more or less transparent and inclusive. For instance, our S&D interviewees described their coordinators as open to recommendations on employment and social issues (Interview 1) but as 'not very democratic' and deciding alone on economic issues (Interview 20).

National party delegations, represented by the heads of delegations, were also powerful actors in internal policy-making. Previous literature has pointed out that the largest delegations wield the most power (e.g. Kreppel, 2002; Ripoll Servent, 2018), and this was confirmed by our interviewees too (Interviews 33; 34). The EPP interviewees, in particular, described how the biggest delegations (Germans in particular) dominated policy-making.

It is really difficult to push things through without the Germans' support. Sometimes one works really long on a topic and it can happen that the Germans come at the last minute and say that they do not accept and changes have to be made. It is the only delegation that can demand all kinds of things at the last minute and the others agree to this. (Interview 27)

Moreover, during the 2014–2019 legislative term, the four biggest EPP national delegations worked together in a manner that could override all smaller delegations (Interview 18). The S&D interviewees also commented on the power of big delegations. Some felt that behind-the-scenes bargaining on national interests made things 'less transparent' (Interview 33). In the context of strong power players, ordinary MEPs were left with little room to influence and overall felt powerless in shaping the group line.

CONCLUSIONS

Based on extensive research material, this chapter has provided new empirical knowledge on how the nationally, culturally and ideologically diverse political groups in the EP formulate group lines on policies that matter to EU citizens. Importantly, it has shed light on the significance of the minutiae of the policy formation processes for democratic policy-making within the political groups.

First, we have shown power hierarchies, both inclusion and exclusion mechanisms, at the political group level as well as the importance of informal institutions, such as everyday practices and unwritten rules, in strengthening or undermining democratic policy-making practices within the groups. Second, we have identified differences between the groups in the degree to which they expect unity or value a single policy position, the modes of decision-making and the treatment of dissenting voices; arenas of decision-making; and the role of leadership and power hierarchies. A key reason for these differences, in addition to group size, was the positioning of the groups in EP decision-making—groups that can influence the position of the EP tend to formulate policies in a more centralised and hierarchical way. The striving for influence within the EP, which is connected to having a unified position, sometimes undermined the principles of inclusion, participation and deliberation also in the smaller groups. Third, our analysis points at an increased rationalisation and centralisation

of intra-group policy formation, which corresponds to the rationalisation of the EP work owing to its increased powers (Brack & Costa, 2018; Ripoll Servent, 2015). This rationalisation may have come at the expense of transparency and increased the powers of the leaders but has also provided new deliberative forums, as in the case of the horizontal working groups.

With emphasis on democratic practices in policy formation, we have suggested that how the political groups formulate policies matters for the democratic functioning of decision-making in the EP and, by extension, for supranational democracy. The nuanced and detailed look at the policy formation processes and political dynamics within the political groups brings a new facet to the discussion of the democratic functioning of the EP and the legislative processes of the EU. Our approach foregrounded the argument that democratic practices, such as transparency, inclusion and deliberation, are a vital component of policy-making at all levels of the legislative system.

NOTE

1. The Greens/EFA group includes members of Green movements, Pirate and Independent MEPs, as well as MEPs from the European Free Alliance (EFA) representing 'stateless nations, regions and minorities, standing up for the right to self-determination' (Greens/EFA website).

REFERENCES

ALDE. (2009). *Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe. Rules of procedure.* Adopted at the Group meeting 4 February 2009.

Berthet, V. (2021). Norm under fire: Support and opposition to EU's ratification to the Istanbul Convention in the European Parliament. *International Feminist Journal of Politics.*

Brack, N., & Costa O. (2018). Democracy in parliament vs. democracy through parliament? Defining the rules of the game in the European Parliament. *Journal of Legislative Studies, 24*(1), 51–71.

Bressanelli, E. (2014). Necessary deepening? How political groups in the European Parliament adapt to enlargement. *Journal of European Public Policy, 21*(5), 776–792.

Bressanelli, E., & Chelotti, N. (2018). The European Parliament and economic governance: Explaining a case of limited influence. *The Journal of Legislative Studies, 24*(1), 72–89.

Chappell, L., & Waylen, G. (2013). Gender and the hidden life of institutions. *Public Administration, 91*(3), 1–17.

Cross, W., & Katz, R. (Eds.) (2013). *Challenges of intra-party democracy.* Oxford University Press.

Daniel, W., & Thierse, S. (2018). Individual determinant for the selection of group coordinators in the European Parliament. *Journal of Cutaneous Medicine and Surgery: Incorporating Medical and Surgical Dermatology, 56*(4), 939–954.

ECR. (2017). *ECR constitution of the group.* As amended 25 November 2014 and 4 July 2017.

EFDD. (2017). *Statutes of the Europe of freedom and direct democracy group.* Updated on 17 January 2017.

Elomäki, A. (2021). 'It's a total no-no': Strategic silence about gender in the European Parliament's economic governance debates. *International Political Science Review.* Advance online publication. https://doi.org/10.1177/019 2512120978329

ENF. (2015, June 15). *Europe of Nations and Freedom political group in the European Parliament statutes.*

EPP. (2013). *Rules of procedure of the group of the European People's Party (Christian Democrats) in the European Parliament.* October 2013. Retrieved 30 January 2021, from https://www.eppgroup.eu/sites/default/files/dow nload/rules-of-procedure/en.pdf

Faas, T. (2003). To defect or not to defect? National, institutional and party group pressures on MEPs and their consequences for party group cohesion in the EP. *European Journal of Political Research, 42*(5), 841–866.

Finke, D. (2012). Proposal stage coalition-building in the European Parliament. *European Union Politics, 13*(4), 487–512.

Greens/EFA. (2020). *Statutes of the parliamentary group the Greens/European Free Alliance in the European Parliament.* Adopted 8 November 2006, changed 5 October 2016 and 15 July 2020.

Hellström, J. (2008). Who leads, who follows? Re-examining the party–electorate linkages on European integration. *Journal of European Public Policy, 15*(8), 1127–1144.

Helmke, G., & Levitsky, S. (2004). Informal institutions and comparative politics: A research agenda. *Perspectives on Politics, 2*(4), 725–740.

Hix, S. (2002). Constitutional agenda-setting through discretion in rule interpretation: Why the European Parliament won at Amsterdam. *British Journal of Political Science, 32*(2), 259–280.

Hix, S., Kreppel, A., & Noury, A. (2003). The party system in the European Parliament: Collusive or competitive? *Journal of Common Market Studies, 41*(2), 309–331.

Hix, S., Abdul, N., & Roland, G. (2007). *Democratic politics and the European Parliament*. Cambridge University Press.

Kantola, J., & Miller, C. (2021). Party politics and radical right populism in the European Parliament: Analysing political groups as democratic actors. *Journal of Common Market Studies, 59*(4), 782–801.

Kantola, J., & Miller C. (2022). Gendered leadership in the European Parliament's political groups. In H. Müller & I. Tömmel (Eds.), *Women and leadership in the European Union* (pp. 150–169). Oxford University Press.

Kantola, J., & Rolandsen Agustín, L. (2016). Gendering transnational party politics: The case of European Union. *Party Politics, 22*(5), 641–651.

Kreppel, A. (2002). *The European Parliament and supranational party system: A study in institutional development*. Cambridge University Press.

Krook, M. L., & Mackay, F. (2011). Introduction: Gender, politics, and institutions. In M. L. Krook & F. Mackay (Eds.), *Gender, politics and institutions*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Lindberg, B. (2008). Are political parties controlling legislative decisionmaking in the European Parliament? The case of the services directive. *Journal of European Public Policy, 15*(8), 1184–1204.

Lindberg, B., Rasmussen, A., & Warntjen, A. (2008). Party politics as usual? The role of political parties in EU legislative decision-making. *Journal of European Public Policy, 15*(8), 1107–1126.

Mackay, F., Kenny, M., & Chappell, L. (2010). New institutionalism through a gender lens: Towards a feminist institutionalism. *International Political Science Review, 31*(5), 573–558.

McDonnell, D., & Werner A. (2019). *International populism. The radical right in the European Parliament*. Hurst Publishers.

O'Keeffe, M., Salines, M., & Wieczorek, M. (2016). The European Parliament's strategy in EU economic and financial reform. *Journal of European Public Policy, 23*(2), 217–235.

Rasmussen, A. (2008). Party soldiers in a non-partisan community? Party linkage in the European Parliament. *Journal of European Public Policy, 15*(8), 1164–1183.

Ringe, N. (2010). *Who decides, and how. Preferences, uncertainty, and policy choice in the European Parliament*. Oxford University Press

Ripoll Servent, A. (2015). *Institutional and policy change in the European Parliament. Deciding on freedom, security and justice*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Ripoll Servent, A. (2018). *The European Parliament*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Ripoll Servent, A., & Panning, L. (2019). Preparatory bodies as mediators of political conflict in trilogues: The European Parliament's shadows meetings. *Politics and Governance, 7*(3), 303–315.

Roger, L., Otjes, S., & van der Veer, H. (2017). The financial crisis and the European Parliament: An analysis of the Two-Pack legislation. *European Union Politics, 18*(4), 560–580.

Roger, L., & Winzen, T. (2015). Party groups and committee negotiations in the European Parliament: Outside attention and the anticipation of plenary conflict. *Journal of European Public Policy, 22*(3), 391–408.

S&D. (2014). *Group of the progressive alliance of socialists & democrats in the European Parliament rules of procedure*. Adopted on 15 October 2014.

Thierse, S. (2019). Policy entrepreneurship in the European Parliament: Reconsidering the influence of rapporteurs. *Journal of European Public Policy, 26*(2), 267–285.

Warasin, M., Kantola, J., Rolandsen Agustín, L., & Coughlan, C. (2019). Politicisation of gender equality in the European Parliament: Cohesion and inter-group coalitions in plenary and committees. In P. Ahrens & L. Rolandsen Agustin (Eds.), *Gendering the European Parliament: Structures, policies, and practices* (pp. 141–158). ECPR Press/Rowman & Littlefield.

Whitaker, R., & Lynch, P. (2014). Understanding the formation and actions of Eurosceptic groups in the European Parliament: Pragmatism, principles and publicity. *Government and Opposition, 49*(2), 232–263.

Waylen, G. (2017). Analysing gender in informal institutions: An introduction. In G. Waylen (Ed.), *Gender and informal institutions*. Rowman & Littlefield.

Wolkenstein, F. (2016). A deliberative model of intra-party democracy. *The Journal of Political Philosophy, 24*(3), 297–320.

Quoted Interviews

Interview 1: S&D staff 04.03.2020, Brussels.
Interview 2: S&D staff 02.03.2020, Brussels.
Interview 3: S&D MEP 02.03.2020, Brussels.
Interview 4: Greens/EFA staff 04.03.2019, Brussels.
Interview 5: Greens/EFA MEP 13.03.2020, Brussels.
Interview 6: Greens/EFA MEP 29.05.2020, online interview.
Interview 7: GUE/NGL MEP 08.04.2020, online interview.
Interview 8: GUE/NGL staff 15.05.2019, Brussels.
Interview 9: GUE/NGL staff 13.06.2019, Brussels.
Interview 10: ECR staff 20.02.2019, Brussels.
Interview 11: GUE/NGL staff 05.03.2020, Brussels.
Interview 12: GUE/NGL MEP 10.03.2020, Brussels.
Interview 13: GUE/NGL staff 24.02.2020, Brussels.

Interview 14: GUE/NGL staff 16.03.2020, online interview.
Interview 15: Greens/EFA MEP 30.09.2019, Brussels.
Interview 16: EPP MEP 08.04.2020, online interview.
Interview 17: ALDE staff 04.05.2019, Brussels.
Interview 18: EPP MEP 28.11.2019, Brussels.
Interview 19: EPP staff 06.03.2020, Brussels.
Interview 20: S&D MEP 29.01.2019, Brussels.
Interview 21: S&D staff 29.04.2019, Brussels.
Interview 22: EPP MEP 21.03.2020, online interview.
Interview 23: Renew MEP 04.03.2020, Brussels.
Interview 24: ALDE staff 29.01.2019, Brussels.
Interview 25: Renew staff 13.03.2020, Brussels.
Interview 26: ALDE staff 04.02.2020, Brussels.
Interview 27: EPP MEP 10.03.2020, Brussels.
Interview 28: EPP MEP 21.02.2019, Brussels.
Interview 29: EPP MEP 22.03.2019, Brussels.
Interview 30: EPP MEP 08.05.2020, Brussels.
Interview 31: Greens/EFA MEP 10.03.2020, Brussels.
Interview 32: ENF staff 26.04.2019, Brussels.
Interview 33: S&D staff 26.02.2020, Brussels.
Interview 34: S&D MEP 16.10.2018, Brussels.
Interview 35: GUE/NGL staff 07.02.2020, Brussels.
Interview 36: Renew MEP 06.02.2020, Brussels.
Interview 37: ECR MEP 31.01.2019, Brussels.
Interview 38: S&D staff 16.05.2019, Brussels.
Interview 39: S&D MEP 26.02.2019, Brussels.
Interview 40: ECR MEP 19.12.2019, Brussels.
Interview 41: ECR staff 18.03.2019, Brussels.
Interview 42: ECR MEP 05.03.2020, Brussels.
Interview 43: Renew staff 04.03.2020, Brussels.