

# Gender, party politics and democracy in Europe: Studying European Parliament's political groups in turbulent times

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# A context of crises

- Economic crisis, conservatism, populism – masculinisation of politics
- Brexit, Covid-19
- Detrimental gendered impacts
- Crisis in gender equality policies – failure of gender mainstreaming in the EU
- New opportunities? Activation of counter movements and politics, new policy openings

# Questions for today

- What can (feminist) political analysis contribute to understanding the multiple crises?
- How do they play out – and with what effects for gender and democratic politics – in the European Parliament and its party politics?



# EUGenDem

- European Research Council Consolidator Grant (2018-2023), team of 6 researchers, based at Tampere University, Finland
- Provides systematic gender analysis of European Parliament's party groups gendered practices and policies
- Homepage: <https://research.uta.fi/gepoco/>
- Twitter: @EUGenDem

# Empirical research design

## POLICIES

### Economic

- New EU economic governance
- Dr Anna Elomäki

### Social

- European Pillar of Social Rights
- Dr Barbara Gaweda

### Violence

- Sexual harassment, Istanbul Convention
- PhD student Valentine Berthet



## PRACTICES

### Formal and informal institutions, norms and practices

- Parliamentary ethnography: practices, informal institutions
- PG formation; Spitzenkandidatur
- Leadership and decision-making
- Gender equality practices of the PG
- Impact of populism, Brexit, Covid-19
- Prof Johanna Kantola, Dr Petra Ahrens, Dr Cherry Miller

# Why European Parliament political groups?

- EP has a strong reputation in gender equality - does it live up to it?
- Crucial for social justice, democracy, just representation
- Political groups understudied with qualitative methods:
  - Using parliamentary ethnography: Theoretically and methodologically interesting → analysis of informal institutions, practices, struggles; also internal democracy (not just voting patterns)
- Times of crises: brings a specific context to studying political representation

# Persistent gender inequalities

- Political representation of women and ethnic and racialised minorities
  - Gendered political, policy and administrative leadership
  - Political groups as gendered organisations
  - Gendered policy-making and expertise
- Familiar left/green vs. right/conservative distinction persists with the former being more amenable to gender concerns. E.g. EPP a particular problem. However, we find significant deviations/exceptions to this.



Johanna Kantola and Cherry Miller (2021) "Gendered leadership in the European Parliament's political groups" in Henriette Mueller and Ingeborg Toemmel (eds.) Women and leadership in the European Union (Oxford: Oxford University Press).



- Discrimination: sexual harassment, MeTooEP campaign (Berthet and Kantola 2020); misogynist, racist language)
- Sexism prevails:
  - Focusing on (women's) looks and appearances
  - Challenging expertise (e.g. Economy, foreign and security policy)
- Gendered care. Poor practices to combine a political career and care
- Position of young women politicians in a seemingly gender equality political context (cf. Sweden and the European Parliament), need to appear tough and fearless

Valentine Berthet and Johanna Kantola (2020). 'Gender, violence and political institutions: Struggles over sexual harassment in the European Parliament', *Social Politics*, Online First. open access

Johanna Kantola and Lise Rolandsen Agustin (2019): 'Gendering the representative work of the European Parliament: A political analysis of women MEP's perceptions of gender equality in party groups', *Journal of Common Market Studies* (JCMS), 57 (4), 768-786. Open access





# The impact of radical right populism

A study of radical right populist strategies against gender equality in European Parliament

All plenary debates 2014-2019, about 94. Important to populists: 34

## **Direct opposition strategies:**

- (i) Rejection of gender equality (e.g. quotas and LHBTI rights; using misogynist speech)
- (ii) Constructing gender equality as “Gender ideology”: gender nonsense, minority problem and waste of time



Johanna Kantola and Emanuela Lombardo (2020) ‘Opposition strategies of right populists against gender equality in a polarized European Parliament’, *International Political Science Review*. Special issue on Populism and Feminist Politics, out very soon.

# Indirect opposition strategies

- (i) *Euroscepticism and subsidiarity* : “gender equality not a matter for EU”
- (ii) *Bending*: using gender equality for opposing Islam or immigration
- (iii) *Self-victimisation*: men and boys as victims (Kate Manne: himpathy), blaming double standards
- (iv) *Depoliticisation*: biological and binary gender; “intersex rights fake rights”, science used selectively

# Effects

- Rhetoric vs policies → policy impact limited
- Hostile (affective) atmosphere towards gender equality and LGBTQI issues and rights in the European Parliament
- Old arguments against gender equality in new populist parcel
- Specific challenges to Gender Sensitive Parliaments frameworks

# Democracy, de-democratisation and political groups' practices

- EU “authoritarian equilibrium” (Kelemen 2020); EP has reacted against democratic backsliding in the member states (Morijn 2019)
- Problems have been identified within EP’s own structures: e.g. incentives towards big group size for more influence (EPP – Fidesz)
- They have not been systematically studied from a PG nor from a gender perspective

Johanna Kantola and Emanuela Lombardo: "Democratic practices and backsliding in the European Parliament: Feminist perspectives on the politics of political groups". Under review for a special issue in *Social Politics* "De-democratisation and opposition to gender equality policies in Europe"





# Argument through feminist democratic theories

- Assessed through the concepts of (i) undermining inclusiveness and participation, and (ii) generating antagonistic dynamics, there is democratic backsliding targeting gender, human rights and the rule of law, triggered by the presence of radical right parties in the EP. However, there are also elements of agonistic deliberation, which create opportunities for improving democratization practices.

# Methodology and research material

- EUGenDem interview material, N=123
- Team coded, here, first, using co-occurrence of the codes democracy and populism, and democratic practices and populism. Second, we searched for the word democra\* to cover democracy and democratic in interviewees' speech
- Plenary debates: purposive qualitative sampling. Out of 107 debates, we selected 35 debates on gender and 12 debates on democracy for closer analysis

# Structure of the analysis

- First, focusing on constructions of democracy in political group discourses illustrating the range from liberal to illiberal ones.
- Secondly, we are attentive to the democratic practices of the political groups, applying the concepts of inclusion and agonism to assess their significance.
- Thirdly, we consider democratic backsliding from the point of view of gender equality policy.

# 1. Constructions of democracy

- Constructions ranged from those consistent with inclusive feminist perspectives, namely progressive and liberal groups who connected democracy to defending the rule of law and fundamental rights,
- To the radical right populists who bend some liberal rights against others to create antagonism and conflict.
  - Radical right populists talk a lot about democracy as a means to construct their opponents as undemocratic, but at the same time they contest its inclusive principles



# Democratic practices of the political groups

- A gap between formal and informal practices of democracy of EP political groups in how democracy is enacted
- Greens/EFA and RRP groups perceive their practices as formally democratic, transparent and open – for different reasons
  - Greens/EFA: respect for different views, gender equality as a norm and actual outcome
  - Internal contradictions in citations about democracy and the way it is enacted among RRP groups
- EPP, S&D and ALDE/Renew interviewees willing to recognise a lack of democratic practices: power hierarchies, lack of transparency, debate and votes



# Gendered democratic backsliding in political groups

- Paradox: often debated in the plenaries, RRP argue that gender equality is and should be a non-issue, yet spend a lot of time opposing it directly and indirectly
- Polarisation around gender in the EP hampers democratic debate → increased antagonism
- Democratic backsliding by not respecting the Union value of gender equality and delegitimising related policies

# Some findings

- Drawing on feminist concepts of inclusiveness of non-hegemonic subjects in deliberations and agonistic contestation:
  - Radical right populist groups, and RRP parties within EPP, promote democratic backsliding in discourses and practices through a variety of strategies
  - Progressive and liberal groups, including liberal conservatives within EPP, overall promote democracy
- All groups' democratic practices could be improved
- Some practices devised to contain dedemocratisation tendencies from RRP involve paradoxes for democratic participation

# What can (feminist) political analysis contribute to understanding the multiple crises?

- Gender integral part of the crisis: feminist political analysis illuminates this
- Attacks on gender not marginal but democracy (and for example European integration) is at stake
- Sidelining gender equality policies and work (such as gender mainstreaming economic recovery or austerity policies), exacerbates gendered inequalities → gender must be an integral part to responses to the crisis



# Thank you!

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