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# Opportunity beckons: the anti-gender movement at the European Parliament

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## ABSTRACT

The European Parliament (EP) is commonly viewed as the most progressive institution of the European Union (EU), given its historic promotion of gender equality and lesbian, gay, bisexual, and trans (LGBT+) rights. As such, it ostensibly represents an adverse venue for the anti-gender movement. This article argues, however, that the EP is more hospitable to anti-gender organizations than the extant scholarship recognizes. Drawing on the concept of political opportunity structures (POSs), it distinguishes between three types of opportunities that the EP offers anti-gender organizations: policy influence, mobilization, and organizational legitimation. Most accounts of POSs focus on the ability of non-state actors to influence public policy. Yet, it is here that anti-gender organizations – important victories notwithstanding – have been least successful. Instead, they have taken greater advantage of the other two opportunities. Through an analysis of the advocacy of anti-gender organizations at the EU level, the article demonstrates that they have used the EP to mobilize institutional and non-institutional allies, consolidating their transnational networks and discrediting their adversaries, as well as to boost their authority by presenting themselves as experts and the legitimate representatives of social interests. In this sense, the EP assists the advocacy of the anti-gender movement.

**KEYWORDS** Gender; LGBT+; anti-gender movement; European Parliament; political opportunity structures

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## Introduction

The European Parliament (EP) is known as a staunch defender of gender equality and lesbian, gay, bisexual, and trans (LGBT+) rights (Mos 2014; Van der Vleuten 2019).<sup>1</sup> The EP's consistent support for the "queering of society" even made one exasperated conservative activist wonder: "[W]here are the happy times when the European Parliament was considered remote and irrelevant?" (Von Krempach 2014). This reputation suggests that the EP

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is a hostile venue for the anti-gender movement, which existing scholarship defines as a transnational network of actors who have, since the late 1990s, mobilized against “gender ideology” – a capacious concept that relates to issues such as the definition of the family, reproductive rights, sex education, and gender studies – at the national and international levels (Graff and Korolczuk 2022; Kuhar and Paternotte 2017). Indeed, existing studies show that anti-gender actors have ultimately been unable to sink, for example, the EP’s policy on abortion or the Istanbul Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (Berthet 2022a, 2022b).

However, we argue that the EP is more hospitable to the anti-gender movement than is acknowledged by the current literature on anti-gender politics at the European Union (EU) level, given its focus on policy influence. Borrowing the concept of political opportunity structures (POSs) from social movement studies, we argue that the EP does not merely constrain the advocacy of anti-gender actors; in other ways, it actually *enables* them to advance their morally conservative agenda. A rich feminist literature has explored how the POSs of international organizations (IOs) shape, and are shaped by, women’s and LGBT+ activism (see for example Ahrens 2019; Ahrens and Woodward 2021; Cullen 2015; Joachim 2007; Joachim and Locher 2009; Locher 2007; Zippel 2004). Indeed, “a key contribution of feminist approaches to European integration has been to theorise activism, the power of framing, and the ‘opportunity structures’ for movement activism” (Locher and Prügl 2009, 185). Our main contribution is to apply insights from this literature to the anti-gender movement in the EP. While anti-gender organizations’ policy successes to date remain limited, we argue that they have seized the opportunities offered by the EP to construct mobilizing structures as well as their legitimacy as experts and the legitimate representatives of social interests on matters of the family, gender and sexuality, and religion. Importantly, as radical-right populist forces occupy a growing number of seats in the EP, anti-gender organizations may increase their chances to parlay these resources into policy influence.

This insight confirms the dynamic nature of the POSs of IOs that feminist analyses have long recognized (Joachim 2007; Joachim and Locher 2009). Changes in political alignments are key in this regard, as they “can bring into power actors whose ideas are more in alignment with those of NGOs [non-governmental organizations]” (Joachim 2007, 7). In fact, the rise in the number of radical-right populist members of the EP (MEPs) since 2009 has considerably increased the number of those who actively oppose gender equality and LGBT+ rights, reaching approximately 30 percent in 2019 (Zacharenko 2020, 16). This has troubled the long-standing reciprocal relation between the EP and equality NGOs, and meanwhile enhanced the opportunities for anti-gender organizations (Ahrens and Woodward 2021, 489).

Moreover, such actors do not passively confront a POS; through their engagement with institutional structures, they may reshape the POS to their advantage (see for example Ahrens 2016). Non-governmental actors thus actively work to improve their chances for success within a given institutional context. We draw on social movement studies to discern three types of opportunities that the EP provides to the anti-gender movement: policy influence, mobilization, and organizational legitimation. Though we keep these opportunities analytically separate, they are deeply interconnected; the same activities may simultaneously target different opportunities, with varying degrees of success. While existing accounts of POSs have touched on these dimensions, studies of anti-gender politics have prioritized the policy-making dimension of POSs, from agenda setting (Joachim 2007) to norm implementation (Locher 2007). We agree with existing studies that the anti-gender movement's policy influence in the EP remains limited. However, the literature has thus far neglected how the other two dimensions of POSs are much more favorable to anti-gender organizations. We suggest that these actors have used opportunities for mobilization and legitimation to lay the groundwork for future policy influence, especially as the EP's composition has shifted increasingly to the right.

First, anti-gender organizations have used their access to MEPs to strengthen their *mobilizing* potential. They have done so, for example, by organizing events within the EP's official premises and by working together with parliamentary bodies such as intergroups and the working groups of EU-level political groups. Allies within the EP have thus facilitated mobilization, even in the absence of policy influence. This insight is consistent with anti-gender organizations' use of side events and semi-formal caucuses at the United Nations (UN) (Goetz 2019), but has yet to be applied to the EP. Anti-gender organizations have also mobilized citizens by organizing petitions, coordinating European Citizens' Initiatives (ECIs), and launching election pledges ahead of EP elections. Second, these same activities have facilitated the *legitimation* of the movement. They have increased the visibility and name recognition of anti-gender organizations. Being affiliated with the EP has enabled the latter to advertise themselves as experts and the legitimate representatives of social interests on matters of the family, gender and sexuality, and religion (Rolandsen Agustin 2012). The EP thereby boosts the authority of anti-gender organizations. In short, this article shows the myriad ways in which the anti-gender movement has used the EP to mobilize allies and to increase its legitimacy. This increases the movement's potential for future policy influence.

We explore the opportunities for policy influence, mobilization, and legitimation that the EP provided to seven anti-gender organizations that operate at the EU level between 2009 and 2023. We focus on transnational anti-gender NGOs, rather than political parties, which have been the focus of

extant literature. Indeed, though anti-gender organizations have significantly increased their presence and activity at the EU level since 2010 (Mos 2018), their strategies remain understudied.

The article proceeds as follows. The next section draws on social movement studies to develop our tripartite understanding of POSs. We then briefly discuss our research design. In the empirical analysis, we apply this concept to our selected anti-gender organizations. Specifically, we ask whether and how each dimension of the POS shapes these organizations' advocacy. The conclusion summarizes our findings and suggests avenues for future research.

### **Political opportunity structures: three outcomes of interest**

The core insight of the literature on POSs is that "activists' prospects for advancing particular claims, mobilising supporters, and affecting influence are context-dependent" (Meyer 2004, 126). While authors understand the concept of POSs differently, the relative openness of the political system and the presence of elite allies are defining characteristics in most accounts (McAdam 1996, 27). Feminist analyses confirm that a POS consists not only of formal institutions, but also informal rules and procedures, and the configuration of political power (Ahrens 2016; Joachim 2007, 7). Generally speaking, movement actors are most likely to mobilize and wield influence if they have access to the political system and if decision makers are *receptive* to their demands, which in turn depends on the presence of allies and favorable political alignments (Joachim 2007, 26–31).

Scholars long assumed that the most important POSs for social movement actors were located at the national level. Herbert Kitschelt's (1986) seminal distinction between weak and strong states illustrates this. As IOs grew in importance, however, a transnationalization of global activism occurred (Tallberg et al. 2013), alongside the proliferation and internationalization of NGOs (Joachim and Locher 2009, 5). European integration was a chief driver of this process. Indeed, the European Commission (EC) actively promoted the creation of, and engagement with, transnational NGOs, including in the area of gender equality (Zippel 2004). Consequently, scholars began to conceive the EU as a novel POS (Marks and McAdam 1996). They found that those structural factors that shaped constraints and opportunities within states – access and receptiveness – also mattered at the EU level. These two elements specify a group's "structure of EU-level opportunities" (Marks and McAdam 1996, 258). Yet, what can these opportunities be used for? Scholars have employed the concept of POSs to explain an array of outcomes. The dependent variable – or "political opportunity for what?" (Meyer 2004, 135) – is not consistently identified. This diversity matters because the same group can face different POSs within a single political system, in relation

to different aims and activities. Indeed, as the empirical analysis will show, the same activities can serve different purposes, even if certain activities are more closely linked to particular outcomes than others. When assessing a POS, therefore, it is imperative that analysts specify their outcome of interest. We emphasize three such possible outcomes: policy influence, mobilization, and legitimization.

David Meyer (2004, 136) distinguishes between opportunities for influence and mobilization. The logic behind the former is straightforward: all else being constant, social movement organizations should have greater policy influence in relatively open and receptive political systems. This idea underpins Kitschelt's (1986) distinction between weak and strong states. However, it also applies at the EU level. Kathrin Zippel (2004, 58), for example, studies how a feminist advocacy network used the EU's relatively "open and flexible field of opportunities for influencing policy" to successfully promote a supranational law on sexual harassment. The POS can thus be used to account for policy influence (or the lack thereof). Second, POSs affect both whether and how non-state actors mobilize. They especially impact such actors' choice of mobilizing structures and tactics. As Jutta Joachim and Birgit Locher (2009, 4) contend, the UN and the EU – as highly open IOs that regulate and constrain institutional access in similar ways – foster a similar pattern of NGO engagement, defined by the formation of new platforms and networks, the key role of alliances with like-minded institutional actors and external constituencies, and conventional lobbying strategies based on expertise rather than radical criticism. The POS thus influences both the occurrence and the nature of advocacy.

Building on this insight, we differentiate between the mobilization of institutional and non-institutional allies. Institutional allies occupy positions of power within the political system. Advocacy groups may seek to mobilize these actors to effect change from within. The literature on state feminism, which refers to feminist activists within women's policy agencies and other bureaucratic units as "femocrats," provides a case in point (Mazur and McBride 2007). However, this group also include political officeholders. We focus on the anti-gender movement's efforts to mobilize a particular group of institutional allies: MEPs. Non-institutional allies, by contrast, hold no official power. Yet, they can be mobilized to put pressure on decision makers. Citizens offer the clearest example. For example, scholars of interest-group politics describe the mobilization of public opinion as outside lobbying (Dür and Mateo 2012). We see the anti-gender movement's use of petitions, ECIs, and election pledges as evidence of such mobilization.

A third, underexplored dimension holds that the political system provides opportunities for organizational legitimization. Such legitimization concerns deliberate efforts that actors undertake to enhance their authority (Lenz and Söderbaum 2023). Even when their chances of influencing policy are

slim and the number of mobilizable allies is negligible, advocacy groups can use their limited access to the political system for the sake of name recognition and reputation management. It is well known that IOs have responded to concerns about their legitimacy by opening up to civil society (Tallberg et al. 2013). However, this instrumental logic also works in the other direction. IOs themselves perform a “legitimization function,” “determining which issues and actors are considered legitimate and which ones are not” (Joachim 2007, 7). As George Mitchell and Sarah Stroup (2017, 414) explain, “reputations are particularly significant for NGOs, whose influence depends on whether they are accepted as an authority rather than their ability to wield material power.”

We argue that anti-gender organizations may similarly seek access to the EP in a strategic attempt to improve their reputation. The central mechanism here is what Sidney Tarrow (2001, 15) calls “certification”: “the recognition of the identities and legitimate public activity of either new actors or actors new to a particular site of activity.” Indeed, affiliation with an IO not only makes a group more visible, but also suggests credibility. It does so essentially by certifying expert and representational status. For example, though NGOs might recognize that the opportunities for “making meaningful contributions” are modest at best, many of them still seek consultative status with the UN Economic and Social Council for reasons of prestige and visibility (Mowell 2020, 114). Our argument dovetails with Lise Rolandsen Agustín’s (2012, 25) finding that conservative women’s organizations that competed with the progressive European Women’s Lobby sought “institutional recognition” from the EP “in order to be legitimized as relevant gender actors.” As we will show, anti-gender organizations are eager to advertise their associations with IOs. We thus believe that a POS concerns opportunities for legitimation as well as for policy influence and mobilization.

## Research design

To illustrate these claims, we analyze the advocacy of seven anti-gender organizations active at the EU level between 2009 and 2023: ADF International, CitizenGO, the European Center for Law and Justice (ECLJ), the Federation of Catholic Family Associations in Europe (FAFCE), One of Us – The European Federation for Life and Human Dignity (One of Us), the Ordo Iuris Institute for Legal Culture (Ordo Iuris), and the World Youth Alliance (WYA). While different in terms of longevity, resources, connections, and levels of activity, these are widely recognized as the leading players in the anti-gender movement at the EU level (Datta 2021; Zacharenko 2020). The defining features of anti-gender actors – opposition to gender equality and LGBT+ rights as “ideologies” and the defense of “traditional” family values – form the core of their advocacy. We start our analysis in 2009

because that year marked the eruption of anti-gender politics in the EP (Ahrens and Woodward 2021, 490).

Our empirical analysis is not exhaustive. Instead, it is a mapping exercise that illustrates the activities of transnational anti-gender organizations in relation to the EP. Hence, we consider a variety of sources spanning the years between 2009 and 2023. These include the anti-gender organizations' official websites and social media accounts (that is, Facebook, YouTube, and X), especially regarding their events in the EP; the websites and annual activity reports of relevant EP bodies, both formal and informal, including the Women's Rights Committee, the intergroups on Freedom of Religion or Belief and Religious Tolerance, on Christians in the Middle East, and on Demographic Challenges, Family–Work Balance, and Youth Transitions, and the Working Group on Bioethics and Human Dignity of the European People's Party (EPP); the EC's portal on the "One of Us" and "Mum, Dad & Kids" ECIs as well as their dedicated websites; and the website of CitizenGO, in particular, for its petitions launched in relation to the EP. For all of these sources, we relied on keywords to identify relevant documents, including "abortion," "dignity," "family," "gay," "gender," "LGBT\*," "marriage," "right to life," "sex," and "sexual orientation." We supplement our analysis with secondary literature and reports by progressive actors on anti-gender politics in Europe, in particular the European Greens and the European Parliamentary Forum for Sexual and Reproductive Rights.

To capture policy influence, we look at the changing composition of the EP; the outcome of plenary votes on important reports concerning gender and sexuality, as identified in the extant literature; and scholarly and journalistic accounts of the policy-making process behind these reports. We measure the mobilization of institutional allies by compiling an overview of the events that anti-gender organizations (co-)organized within the premises of the EP. Our analysis considers promotional materials for and coverage of these events on the organizers' websites. With respect to non-institutional allies, we investigate the use of online petitions, ECIs, and electoral pledges. Finally, we take our cue from Rolandsen Agustín (2012, 33) in examining how anti-gender organizations have tried to "legitimate their status as significant actors and situate themselves in the growing field of European civil society organisations." We do this in two ways: (1) by analyzing how these actors advertise their engagement with the EP online and in written publications, and (2) by studying how anti-gender organizations have used two human rights issues – Down syndrome and religious freedom – to camouflage their preoccupation with gender and sexuality. Our approach thus builds on Clifford Bob's (2019, 68) insight that political actors "may be diverted by rights rhetoric into lending their support, ignoring or downplaying what is really driving the movement and what is at stake in the fray." Importantly, our analysis tracks the anti-gender movement's efforts to

mobilize allies and to acquire legitimacy. Whether these efforts have been successful remains, as the conclusion discusses, an open question.

## **The political opportunity structure of the anti-gender movement at the European Parliament**

This section applies our tripartite understanding of POSs. Extant scholarship already addresses the ability of anti-gender organizations to influence the EP's policies on gender equality and LGBT+ rights (Berthet 2022a, 2022b; Santos and Geva 2022), as well as the increasing politicization of these issues within the parliamentary arena (Ahrens and Woodward 2021; Kantola and Lombardo 2021). We believe that the current literature has insufficiently recognized the opportunities for mobilization and legitimation that the EP offers to anti-gender organizations. Our empirical analysis therefore devotes more space to these two dimensions of a POS.

### ***Opportunities for policy influence***

Opportunities for policy influence depend on the openness and receptiveness of the political system, albeit in a curvilinear manner; actors will seek to influence public policy if they consider it both necessary *and* potentially effective (Meyer and Staggenborg 1996, 1631). In this regard, the EP represents an ambivalent POS for anti-gender organizations. On the one hand, it is deliberately open to civil society. Hence, while the EP has historically engaged with progressive organizations (Ahrens and Woodward 2021), anti-gender organizations can also take advantage of its openness. On the other hand, its history of promoting gender equality and LGBT+ rights suggests that the EP is not receptive to their demands.

Importantly, however, the rise in the number of radical-right populist MEPs since 2009 has eroded the EP's progressive consensus on both issues, giving way to a much more polarized environment (Kantola and Lombardo 2021). This polarization renders the EP more receptive to the anti-gender movement's demands. In fact, anti-gender organizations and like-minded MEPs have forged an "opportunistic synergy," which includes "political alliances, ideological affinities and organisational ties" (Graff and Korolczuk 2022, 7). These synergistic links provide the foundation for the policy influence of anti-gender organizations in the EP. Hence, while the EP overall continues to adopt progressive gender equality and LGBT+ rights policies, anti-gender organizations have been able to weaken and even defeat some core initiatives.

The most notorious example occurred in 2013 when anti-gender organizations decisively contributed to the defeat of the EP's Estrela Report on sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR). CitizenGO launched an

e-petition that gathered more than 50,000 signatures, while European Dignity Watch (EDW) coordinated a campaign that flooded MEPs' inboxes with around 100,000 emails (Zacharenko 2020, 60). Ultimately, the EP adopted an alternative resolution, presented jointly by members of the EPP and the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR), which consisted of only three paragraphs emphasizing that SRHR were a member-state competence. This outcome "destroyed a carefully crafted cross-group consensus in favour of SRHR and women's rights in the European Parliament" (Santos and Geva 2022, 477).

Such direct policy influence, however, is exceptional. In fact, anti-gender organizations have failed to thwart or even dilute contemporaneous reports on gender equality and homophobia (Ahrens and Woodward 2021). A more recent initiative met the same fate despite its similarities with the one against the Estrela Report. The 2021 Matić Report also concerned SRHR, and in particular the "right to safe and legal abortion within the EU" (Berthet 2022b, 1797). The anti-gender movement used familiar tactics; the report was the subject of e-petitions organized by CitizenGO and Ordo Iuris. Yet, this time they were ineffective, and the EP adopted the Matić Report by a comfortable margin. According to the rapporteur himself, Predrag Fred Matić, the vote marks "the first real resistance to a regressive agenda that has trampled on women's rights in Europe for years" (Hutchinson 2021). This comment suggests that the policy influence of the anti-gender movement, while already limited to begin with, is on the wane.

In short, anti-gender organizations have been unable to consistently shape the gender equality and LGBT+ rights policies of the EP. The opportunities for policy influence have thus far proven limited. Nevertheless, anti-gender actors have successfully increased the polarization on such topics. As the EU's political landscape shifts ever further to the right, and as resistance to "gender ideology" takes greater hold of the EP, the anti-gender movement's ability to translate this polarization into actual policy influence increases.

### ***Opportunities for the mobilization of allies***

In comparison, the EP offers anti-gender organizations greater opportunities to strengthen their mobilizing potential. The EP works as a *mobilizing structure*, or a "structural social location that [is] not aimed primarily at movement mobilisation but where mobilisation may be generated" (McCarthy 1996, 141). Indeed, the EP offers such organizations various avenues to mobilize potential supporters within and outside the EP. The main institutional allies are MEPs. Non-institutional allies, by contrast, are predominantly EU citizens, who can be mobilized to pressure EU decision makers.

### ***Mobilizing institutional allies: events, intergroups, and political working groups***

The EP offers the anti-gender movement three main avenues to mobilize MEPs: the organization of events within its official premises, and collaboration with two semi-official parliamentary bodies, intergroups and the thematic working groups of European political groups. Anti-gender organizations regularly target those MEPs most aligned with their agenda, who are commonly found in the ECR and Identity and Democracy (ID) groups, and to a more limited extent in the EPP (see Ahrens, Gaweda, and Kantola 2022; Zacharenko 2020). The advocacy of anti-gender organizations is not limited to these, however, as they actively seek to mobilize MEPs across the political spectrum. Moreover, it is not only anti-gender organizations that seek to engage like-minded MEPs in their activities; as the relationship is mutually beneficial, MEPs also actively reach out to the anti-gender movement.<sup>2</sup>

First, anti-gender actors have tried to mobilize institutional allies by organizing a growing number of events in the EP. Such events are often linked to the EP's legislative agenda. For example, the ECLJ co-hosted a symposium titled "Religious Freedom in the Middle East" with Peter van Dalen, a Dutch MEP for the EPP. The event took place a few months before the EP adopted a resolution on the persecution of Christians in Syria, Pakistan, and Iran. The ECLJ (2013) noted that "MEPs from across the political divide" attended. The EP's resolution was also the result of a cross-partisan joint motion. Other organizations capitalize on commemorative days instead. FAFCE has connected its advocacy to the International Day of Families. In 2018, for example, it seized this day to present a "Resolution on the Demographic Winter in Europe" in the EP (FAFCE 2018). The WYA, meanwhile, mobilizes around World Down Syndrome Day. Its events frequently attract the support of MEPs across the political spectrum, and from the EPP and the ECR in particular. Anti-gender organizations do not merely use these events to mobilize allies; as we will show later, they also use the issues of religious freedom and Down syndrome for organizational legitimization.

Occasionally, however, anti-gender organizations also organize events that are explicitly linked to their morally conservative agenda. In 2015, for example, One of Us, ADF International, and four EPP MEPs invited Lila Rose, a controversial anti-choice advocate, to the EP. The event, titled "You Can't Put a Price on a Baby's Heart: The Sale of Baby Organs," was part of a broader campaign to discredit the International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF). The MEPs participating in the event issued parliamentary questions calling on the EC to cease its funding of the IPPF and sent letters to the president of the EP demanding that the federation be banned from organizing events within it (Zacharenko 2020, 52). By organizing events

such as this, therefore, anti-gender organizations are able to cultivate allies by discrediting their adversaries.

Semi-official parliamentary bodies offer the anti-gender movement a second avenue to mobilize MEPs. Intergroups, which are “informal, cross-party, cross-committee groupings” that link MEPs with a shared interest in a topic (Landorff 2019, 266), are a key example. While progressive actors have cooperated closely with equality-based intergroups, anti-gender organizations have focused their efforts on intergroups linked to religion and the family instead. Current examples include the intergroups on Freedom of Religion or Belief and Religious Tolerance, on Christians in the Middle East, and on Demographic Challenges, Family–Work Balance, and Youth Transitions.<sup>3</sup> The first two, for example, co-hosted an event on the persecution of Christians in Pakistan with the ECLJ and ADF International, which invited two Pakistani citizens formerly sentenced to death for blasphemy to give their testimony. Indeed, as Birgit Locher suggests (2007, 88), providing testimonial knowledge is one of the key assets of NGOs at the EU level, gaining them not only access but also recognition as experts. The chairs of the third intergroup, in turn, participated in FAFCE’s (2020) webinar on demographic challenges and sustainable development. While most members of these intergroups belong to the EPP and the ECR, the intergroups also include social-democratic and liberal MEPs. Hence, they facilitate the mobilization by anti-gender organizations of allies across the political spectrum.

Finally, anti-gender organizations cooperate with a second type of informal parliamentary body: the thematic working groups of European political groups. Anti-gender organizations mostly cooperate with such groups within the EPP and the ECR. The most prominent example is the EPP’s Working Group on Bioethics and Human Dignity.<sup>4</sup> Between 2014 and 2019, when Slovak EPP representative Miroslav Mikolášik served as chairman, the working group acted as a hub for anti-gender advocacy. It sponsored some of the most provocative events. In 2015, for example, it co-hosted the aforementioned event on the alleged sale of baby organs. A year later, it invited the ECLJ to discuss “neonatal infanticide” (ECLJ 2016), and ADF International and FAFCE to debate “How to Stop the Surrogacy Business” (FAFCE 2016). Moreover, since 2016 it has organized the annual Week for Life in the EP with One of Us.

While neither intergroups nor the thematic working groups of European political groups have formal decision-making power, it is precisely their informality that works in the anti-gender movement’s favor. As Laura Landorff (2019, 275) argues, intergroups provide “easier, more exclusive and more frequent access to MEPs” and “better opportunity for dialogue” than more formal venues such as parliamentary committees. In short, intergroups and political working groups offer anti-gender organizations an important avenue for the mobilization of institutional allies.

### ***Mobilizing non-institutional allies: petitions, European Citizens' Initiatives, and electoral pledges***

The EP also offers anti-gender organizations several avenues for the mobilization of non-institutional allies, especially European citizens. Here we distinguish between three types of mobilization: petitions, ECIs, and electoral pledges.

First, anti-gender organizations use petitions to put pressure on MEPs. This is evident in the advocacy of CitizenGO, an ultra-conservative spin-off of the Spanish HazteOír, which has the explicit aim of working “internationally along the line of already existing multilingual petition platforms” (Rivera 2019, 9). Since 2013, it has addressed more than 40 petitions on socially conservative issues to the EP, in multiple languages. Most of these petitions call for the rejection of EP reports on gender equality and LGBT+ rights. They use a strong rhetoric and symbology to support their call for action. The petition against the Estrela Report (CitizenGO 2013), for example, argued that the report promoted the funding of the “pro-abortion lobby” and turned minors into “sex education propagandists.” E-petitions have become increasingly popular. While CitizenGO’s petition against the Estrela Report attracted around 50,000 signatures, the one against the Matic Report was signed by 420,000 people (CitizenGO 2013, 2021). These figures showcase the anti-gender movement’s capacity to mobilize the general public.

Second, anti-gender organizations have used ECIs to mobilize EU citizens. Though technically only citizens may organize these initiatives, anti-gender organizations have twice found a way around this by setting up citizens’ committees. The first and most successful ECI, “One of Us,” was launched in 2012. It called on the EU to “establish a ban and end the financing of activities which presuppose the destruction of human embryos, in particular in the areas of research, development aid and public health” (EC 2014). Various anti-gender organizations were affiliated with the initiative; the ECLJ’s director presided over the committee, EDW conducted the research on EU funding for SRHR in non-EU countries, and others, including CitizenGO and FAFCE, explicitly backed it (Mos 2018). While the organizers collected the necessary signatures (1.7 million), the EC decided not to take legislative action. The anti-gender movement launched a second ECI, “Mum, Dad & Kids,” in 2016. Its aim was to ensure that all EU legislation was guided by a shared and heteronormative definition of marriage and the family (Mos 2018, 335). The EC never considered this proposal, however, because the organizers, who included representatives from FAFCE, Ordo Iuris, and ADF International, failed to attract sufficient signatures.

Third, anti-gender organizations have mobilized EU citizens ahead of EP elections. The use of electoral pledges is key in this regard. In 2014, for example, CitizenGO, EDW, and FAFCE all issued pledges (Zacharenko 2020,

63). FAFCE, in particular, asked prospective MEPs to commit themselves, if elected, to defending conservative values including “human dignity and the right to life,” “the family founded on the legal union between a man and a woman,” and “freedom of education promoting parents’ rights” (FAFCE 2014). Its pledges five years later even called for a “European Natality Pact” and the use of “family mainstreaming,” as an alternative to gender mainstreaming (FAFCE 2019). Not only do these pledges aim to mobilize citizens to vote for “appropriate” candidates, they also enable anti-gender organizations to hold these politicians accountable once they take office.

Hence, the anti-gender movement uses different avenues to mobilize MEPs and citizens. This mobilization is not only a vehicle for policy influence; importantly, it also allows anti-gender organizations to strengthen their transnational networks. When the EC rejected their ECI, for example, the organizers of “One of Us” formed a federation that continues to advocate for morally conservative values. Mobilization therefore provides valuable opportunities for network building.

### ***Opportunities for organizational legitimization***

Beyond policy influence and mobilization, the EP also provides the anti-gender movement with opportunities for legitimization. Anti-gender organizations use their affiliations with the institution to allege credibility and expertise (Rolandsen Agustín 2012). Their connections with MEPs – and with IOs more generally – enable these groups to depict themselves as respected experts and as legitimate representatives of social interests on the family, religion, and human rights.

To illustrate this, look at how ADF International (n.d.b) describes itself:

ADF International is a highly respected organization that engages in legal advocacy alongside numerous partners all over the world. [...] ADF International is accredited by the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), the European Parliament and Commission and the Organization of American States (OAS). Additionally, we enjoy participatory status with the EU’s Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) and engage regularly with the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE).

ADF International evidently uses its affiliations with leading IOs to support its claim to authority. Its senior legal counsel boasts about the “numerous keynote addresses on issues of fundamental human rights” that he has delivered “to various committees and inter-groups at the European Parliament and at national Parliaments” (Coleman and Kiska 2012, 113). ADF International (n.d.a) also claims to be “ideally placed” to “provide expert advice to the European Parliament, European Commission, and Council of Ministers.” Similar formulations can be found in the communications of

other anti-gender actors. One of Us (n.d.) emphasizes the attendance of “several MEPs,” including the chair of the EPP’s Working Group on Bioethics and Human Dignity, at its founding conference. The ECLJ (2009) has also emphasized its parliamentary accreditation. It sees “high level networking” – as evidenced by its cooperation with “Members of European Parliament and the European Commission in the legislative process” – as key to its success (ECLJ n.d.). In making these claims, the organizations do not have to demonstrate any policy influence; institutional access alone buttresses this legitimization strategy. This is the case even though anti-gender organizations predominantly work with a handful of MEPs.

To further build credibility, the anti-gender movement concentrates most of its efforts on benign topics that enjoy cross-partisan support and are widely viewed through the prism of human rights. Open resistance to “gender ideology” risks discrediting an advocacy group with MEPs, given the EP’s long history of supporting gender equality and LGBT+ rights. Mobilization on uncontested issues may, however, boost an actor’s reputation. We can see this logic at play in anti-gender organizations’ focus on disability rights and religious freedom. Advocacy on such topics makes them appear like conventional human rights organizations. Bob (2019, 67) argues that this tactic, which he calls “rights as camouflage,” is a well-established tactic among anti-rights activists.

### *The anti-gender movement and World Down Syndrome Day*

In 2011, the UN General Assembly declared March 21 to be World Down Syndrome Day. Two members of the anti-gender movement have spearheaded the promotion of this annual celebration within the EP: the Fondation Jérôme Lejeune and the WYA. Indeed, the former is named after the French geneticist who discovered the chromosomal abnormality that causes Down syndrome. However, the mission of the Fondation Jérôme Lejeune (n.d.) extends beyond disability rights; like most players within the anti-gender movement, it aims at the “defence of life and dignity of the individual from its conception to its natural death.” In terms of cumulative spending, the Fondation Jérôme Lejeune is the largest “anti-gender funder” in Europe (Datta 2021). The WYA, meanwhile, is a core member of the “pro-life/pro-family coalition” that advocates for a conservative understanding of human dignity (Head 2000). The two groups are thus best seen not as disability rights organizations but as anti-gender activists.

Yet, in the EP the actors are known primarily for their promotion of World Down Syndrome Day. This promotion takes two forms. The first is the organization of conferences to coincide with World Down Syndrome Day, as mentioned above, with the support of political actors in the EP. These party-political imprimaturs, along with the advertised participation of “researchers and clinicians of international renown,” have strengthened the organizers’

credentials (Fondation Jérôme Lejeune 2017).<sup>5</sup> Speakers have included key figures such as the European Commissioner for Health and the President of the EP. The participation of social-democratic MEPs demonstrates that politicians across the political spectrum hold the organizations in high regard.

Second, the organizations have used the occasion to launch a social media challenge. Since 2015, they have invited MEPs to wear mismatched socks on World Down Syndrome Day (Fondation Jérôme Lejeune 2015). Participants are asked to post a picture or video of themselves on social media, while using the hashtag #Socksbattle4DS, and to challenge fellow parliamentarians or other influential figures to do the same. The campaign exemplifies the anti-gender movement's savvy use of social media. In 2017, more than 50 MEPs, including EP President Jerzy Buzek, took part (lavdokymova 2017). As the Socks Battle gives the organizers the appearance of mainstream human rights activists, some parliamentarians have been unaware of the campaign's origins. This is how Seb Dance, a British Labour MEP, recounts his experience with the campaign:

When I read their website, I felt really let down that I had fallen into their trap. I confronted them and I said "What is your agenda here?" and they kind of squirmed a bit. [...] I was furious to think that they were operating under a so-called awareness-raising banner, but actually they were promoting a completely different agenda.<sup>6</sup>

Some participants have in fact been sworn enemies of the anti-gender movement. Among them was Ulrike Lunacek, whose initiative for an EU roadmap against homophobia fell victim to a spiteful online campaign that resembled the backlash against the Estrela Report (Lunacek 2015). Simply by wearing mismatched socks, MEPs have thus unwittingly aided the legitimization of anti-gender organizations.

We do not wish to question the sincerity of anti-gender organizations' support for World Down Syndrome Day. The Fondation Jérôme Lejeune and the WYA, however, are not disability rights organizations in the conventional sense; indeed, they are neither members of the European Disability Forum, an umbrella organization of persons with disabilities, nor of the European Down Syndrome Association. Whereas these actors emphasize the importance of social inclusion and equal opportunities, the Fondation Jérôme Lejeune and the WYA are driven instead by a concern for human dignity. It is this principle, which they interpret in a strictly conservative manner, that drives all of their activism. Anti-abortion activism therefore goes hand in hand with the celebration of World Down Syndrome Day. The Fondation Jérôme Lejeune (2016) provocatively spelled out this connection in an online video titled "Dear Future Mom," in which children with Down syndrome tell pregnant women not to be afraid of bearing a child with this condition. The message is obvious: a prenatal diagnosis of Down syndrome is not a justifiable cause for abortion.

Within the EP, this linkage between abortion and Down syndrome is camouflaged (see Bob 2019). The Socks Battle and annual conferences instead create the impression that the organizers are neutral and authoritative spokespersons. Some MEPs, such as Seb Dance, may cease to support these initiatives once they learn about the organizers' conservative views. However, most representatives and the general public are unlikely to become aware of the organizations' background. The anti-gender movement, in sum, uses disability rights activism within the EP to establish credibility.

### *The anti-gender movement and religious freedom*

Whereas human dignity provides the common denominator for some advocacy groups, for others religious freedom is the foundation of their entire policy agenda. Indeed, the freedom that ADF International claims to defend in name refers first and foremost to religious freedom. The focus on this principle marks a strategic adjustment. Recognizing that the tide of public opinion is not shifting in their favor, conservative activists have taken what Andrew Lewis (2017, 149) calls a "rights turn"; as they now see themselves as a "threatened minority," they are placing "an increasing emphasis on rights claims." The language of religious freedom allows the anti-gender movement to camouflage its outright resistance to issues such as SRHR and LGBT+ rights.

Outside the EP, the rhetoric of religious freedom predominantly concerns free speech, conscientious objection, and parental rights. ADF International (2019) actively campaigns against European hate speech laws, which it believes threaten the freedom of speech and even "hurt democracy." Anti-gender organizations often represent conscientious objectors – such as midwives who refuse to perform abortions (Selberg 2020) – in court. Parental rights include the right to homeschool one's children and the right to remove them from classes that do not align with one's parental convictions. The Observatory on Intolerance and Discrimination against Christians in Europe, an advocacy group of the religious right masquerading as a human rights watchdog, groups these issues together under the banner of "secular intolerance," which it claims is the "main dynamic that causes the erosion and limitation of the freedoms of Christians" in Europe (Wright 2022).

Within the EP, however, religious freedom is deliberately associated with religious persecution. The vast majority of events that both ADF International and the ECLJ (co-)organize in the EP, as the section on mobilization discussed, deal with violence against Christians outside the EU. This focus on religious freedom camouflages the more repressive items on their agenda, including their opposition to LGBT+ rights and SRHR. The upshot is that the co-organizers do not appear like anti-gender campaigners but like conventional human rights activists (Bob 2019).

Strategic incentives guide the anti-gender movement's use of this language of persecution and discrimination (Dick 2021). This much

becomes clear from a leaked strategy document of a network of anti-gender organizations known as Agenda Europe. The manifesto, titled *Restoring the Natural Order: An Agenda for Europe*, specifically calls on activists to “use the weapons of our opponents and [to] turn them against them” (Agenda Europe 2014, 119). The decision to argue that Christians are being marginalized or even persecuted is thus more a strategic than a sincere one. The manifesto explains:

Contemporary mainstream culture paradoxically gives rewards to groups who manage to posture in the role of “victims of discrimination.” Even if one can find this posturing questionable, there is no doubt that we can use it very successfully as a strategy. [...] If we use this strategy consistently, the least that we can achieve is that it will become less efficient for our adversaries. (Agenda Europe 2014, 119)

The anti-gender movement thus claims to defend an oppressed minority. This dovetails with another objective that Agenda Europe (2014, 117) spells out: “to be recognized and respected as an interlocutor at international or UN level.” This certification strategy has borne fruit. For example, the EP Intergroup on Freedom of Religion or Belief and Religious Tolerance (2016) treats ADF International as a leading expert on religious freedom in its annual reports. The intergroup similarly lists the ECLJ as a supporting source alongside established human rights organizations, including Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, and reputable news outlets such as Reuters and the *New York Times* (EP Intergroup on Freedom of Religion or Belief and Religious Tolerance 2014). Evidently, the advocacy groups’ decision to embrace religious freedom, and human rights more generally, as a master frame has enabled them to raise their profile.

## Conclusion

Feminist scholars have long studied activism around gender equality and LGBT+ rights through the lens of POSs. We have contributed to this literature by focusing on the EP as a POS for anti-gender organizations operating at the EU level. We have specifically distinguished between three types of opportunities that the EP offers to anti-gender organizations: policy influence, mobilization, and organizational legitimization.

The empirical analysis has shown that the policy influence of anti-gender organizations within the EP remains limited. The exponential rise in the number of anti-choice and radical-right populist MEPs since 2009 has at best enabled anti-gender organizations to increase the polarization around gender equality and LGBT+ rights and to delay the adoption of progressive policies or dilute their content. They have, however, seldom been able to block these initiatives altogether. They have benefited far more from the other two opportunities that the EP provides. Anti-gender organizations

have capitalized on the various avenues that the EP offers for the mobilization of allies. Moreover, they have tried to augment their credibility and authority through their affiliation with the EP. We thus suggest that scholars should look not only at how IOs shape advocacy organizations' potential for policy influence. Indeed, seemingly unreceptive venues may still provide ample opportunities for mobilization and legitimation. These opportunities may, as the EP's composition changes, pave the way for greater policy influence.

Importantly, we could make only limited claims about the anti-gender movement's causal impact. Most of these claims concern policy influence, which is empirically tractable and, consequently, has been the subject of extant research. The findings concerning our other two dimensions of the POS are necessarily more modest; though we clearly find that anti-gender organizations have used the opportunities for mobilization and legitimation, we do not know how consequential their efforts have been. Our empirical analysis offers mainly anecdotal evidence of these organizations' ability to gain and influence allies. Future studies should therefore measure the causal significance of the anti-gender movement's engagement with the EP. Has anti-gender organizations' mobilization of non-institutional allies, for example, led to an increase in donations or institutional affiliations?<sup>7</sup> Are their events attended by a growing and diversifying number of parliamentary representatives? Do MEPs increasingly, and approvingly, reference organizations such as ADF International and the ECLJ in their own work? Engaging with these and related questions would allow scholars to examine whether the anti-gender movement's engagement with opportunities for policy influence, mobilization, and legitimation, which this article has documented, have in fact been successful.

Relatedly, other analyses could explore the development of POSs over time. The dynamic nature of POSs was implied in our observation that the EP becomes more receptive to the anti-gender movement as the proportion of radical-right populist MEPs increases (see Ahrens and Woodward 2021). Space constraints have prevented us from systematically studying changes in this POS over time. Scholars who take up this task should be especially mindful of movement-counter-movement dynamics (Meyer and Staggenborg 1996). In this regard, we look forward to learning more about how the activities of progressive advocacy organizations in the EU have altered the anti-gender movement's POS, and vice versa.

## Notes

1. We speak of "LGBT+ rights" to capture the terminology that was dominant in the early period of our analysis (LGBT: lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) as well as its expansion over time (+).

2. For example, Margarita de la Pisa Carrión (2021), a representative of the Spanish radical-right party Vox, labored to include anti-gender organizations in a side event of the EP's committee on Women's Rights and Gender Equality (FEMM) at the Conference on the Future of Europe.
3. The list of accredited intergroups varies with each legislative term, as does their mandate. For example, the intergroup on Demographic Challenges, Family–Work Balance, and Youth Transition started off as the intergroup on Family and the Rights of the Child. In 2009, bioethics was added to its name. Five years later, its name was changed to Active Ageing, Intergenerational Solidarity, and Family Policies.
4. Other examples include the working groups Intercultural and Religious Dialogue (EPP) and Freedom of Religion and Belief (ECR).
5. This is our translation.
6. In-person interview, June 30, 2016.
7. We thank the anonymous reviewers for raising this point.

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