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The European Union and the Challenge of Rescaling Representation

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Abstract

This article focuses on the challenges associated with scaling up representative democracy from the European Union's (EU) member states to the EU level. We argue that the notion of scaling up, understood as copying nation-state representational arrangements to the EU level, provides an inaccurate depiction of what is going on and the main challenges facing the EU and its member states. A more apt depiction of what is going on is *rescaling* democracy. Representative democracy is not only about elections, parties, and parliaments; it operates within and is shaped by a broader ecology of civil society, public sphere and media, democratic community, rule of law, and constitutionalism. The article starts by outlining what is meant by scaling up, along with the ecology of nation-state democracy. Thereafter, the article outlines how representative democracy is configured in the multilevel EU and shows how that makes the EU a case of rescaling democracy.

Keywords

European Union; representative democracy; representative ecology; rescaling; scaling up

1. Introduction

The purpose of this article—in line with the thematic issue's emphasis on the democratic disconnect (see Severs & Fossum, 2026; Castiglione & Verzichelli, 2026)—is to address the challenges associated with scaling up representative democracy from the European Union's (EU) member states to the EU level. This issue has historically been fought out between supranationalists and intergovernmentalists, with the former arguing for developing the EU as a full-fledged representative democracy (Føllesdal & Hix, 2006) and the latter instead stressing the need for preserving democracy at the member-state level (Bellamy, 2019; Lindseth, 2010; Majone, 2005; Moravcsik, 2002). But whereas this debate divides on the desirability of scaling up

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democracy from the member state to the EU level, the two positions do not diverge much on how they understand representative democracy; they both draw heavily on representative democracy as we know it from the nation-state context. With scaling up is therefore meant that those features of the system of representative democracy (elections, parliaments, and parties) that are familiar in the nation-state context are lifted to the European level so that EU-level democracy mimics member-state democracy.

We argue that this notion of scaling up provides an inaccurate depiction of what is going on and only partly captures the main challenges facing the EU and its member (and affiliated) states. A more apt depiction is that representative democracy is *rescaled* rather than scaled up. As shown below, there is a literature on rescaling, but that does not pay much attention to systems of representation. Conversely, the large literature on EU democratization does not analyze that as a case of rescaling representation.

Rescaling occurs when arrangements for representative democracy change in their character as a result of being transposed to an unfamiliar institutional context at a different level of governance (below or above the state). The term "rescaling" usefully shows there are limits to how far we can use the nation-state analogy to understand the EU level. The problem that rescaling helps us address is that EU democratization as it unfolds in practice is not a matter of choosing between supranationalism and intergovernmentalism—the EU incorporates both features in a complex and unprecedented mixture.

The REDIRECT project underlines that every system of representation (elections, parliaments, and parties) is embedded within a broader *ecology* of representation. Representative ecology is wide-encompassing and includes "civil society and advocacy organisations, interest and professional groups, the old and new media, social movements, specialised discourses, and the knowledge and practices emerging from other institutions of the state and society at large" (Castiglione, 2024; see also Merkel's notion of "embedded democracy" in Merkel, 2019, and indicators of democracy proposed by Beetham et al., 2008, and the project Varieties of Democracy, 2025). Representative ecology also implies that these elements are organized in a distinct fashion to support and sustain the workings of representative democracy.

The article will show that the process of developing representative democracy at the EU level is a case of rescaling because the EU level contains arrangements that are similarly worded but operate in a different context, are differently related to each other, and do not function in the same manner as their namesakes in democratic nation-states. That becomes apparent when the representative ecology associated with the nation-state is contrasted with how representative democracy is configured in the multilevel EU context.

Because the EU exhibits a mix of supranational and intergovernmental arrangements, the problem of rescaling arises not only in establishing representative democracy at the EU level but in using member state democracies to control what goes on at the EU level. When both supranational and intergovernmental strategies are pursued simultaneously, as in the present-day EU, rescaling occurs both bottom-up and top-down.

The next section elaborates what is meant by scaling up. It does that across all the core elements of the representative ecology associated with the nation-state. These elements are distilled from the literature on nation-state democracy; there is no presumption that nation-states will necessarily comply with these. The elements are cast in broad terms because there is considerable variation in how these elements are configured within the nation-state context.

The subsequent section discusses how and how far the EU deviates from this through rescaling. The final section concludes.

2. Core Components of the Nation-State's Representative Ecology

Our baseline definition of democracy is public control with political equality (Beetham, 1994, p. 28). What that implies for the relationship between formal and substantive equality requires further specification. Mastropaolo (2012) for instance has underlined that an overly strong focus on formal procedures risks overlooking structural inequalities. Such an assessment is beyond the scope of this article. Democracy is a normative term, but this article is not about the normative evaluation of the quality of democracy but about how democracy is embedded across the elements of the representative ecology. The approach is normative analytical, not normative evaluative.

Our point of departure is that representative institutions (elections, parliaments, and parties) offer only limited satisfaction of public control with political equality unless they are embedded in a broader representative ecology. That also means that the elements of the ecology interact, and in a functioning democracy they will be mutually reinforcing. Within the nation-state context we have developed quite specific expectations for how they interact. In the EU, as a distinct case of supranational democracy, we need to examine which elements there are and how they interact. We cannot take nation-state expectations as our point of departure. Instead, we unpack, specify, and make more suitable for explicating the EU's distinctive features Castiglione's (2024) presentation of the representative ecology. The more EU arrangements deviate across the entire ecology, the more the process of establishing representative democracy at the EU level is one of rescaling rather than scaling up.

2.1. Elections

Electoral systems shape how political representation works. Elections must be free, fair, and equal (each vote has equal weight). Elections enable citizens to control the nature, functions, and composition of government (Beetham et al., 2008, p. 74). Elections of representatives are more than forms of aggregation. They are forms of communication and public opinion formation, and not just between would-be representatives and those they claim to represent, but between the represented themselves. Elections are part of the process by which the represented become aware of themselves as a public (Dewey, 1954) with some shared responsibility for the laws they control together through the representatives they elect.

2.2. Political Parties

Parties are key to representative democracy (White & Ypi, 2016). Their reach or influence extends across much of the representative ecology (Mair, 2013). Parties structure and coordinate voter choices and make it easier for voters to make important choices with limited information. Parties enable voters to choose whole teams of representatives and whole packages of policies, or at least broad orientations to politics. Parties act as central intermediaries and communicators between civil society and the political system. Parties operate as shapers and receivers of societal inputs to government.

2.3. Executive and Legislative Leadership

Representative democracy relies on institutions that can effectuate decisions and provide leadership, while being responsive to citizens. Crucial to that are government–legislature relations, of which there are two main models. One, a separation of powers (similar to the American system of checks and balances); the other, a parliamentary fusion of powers between executive and legislature (associated with the United Kingdom). Although different ways of exercising power, both models aim to provide voters with the means of exercising public control with political equality through periodic opportunities to elect or remove representatives with powers to control the authoring, amendment, and administration of laws.

2.4. Parliamentary Oversight

To ensure public control, parliament must be able to check the executive across all issues. While parliamentary elections make or break governments, parliamentary scrutiny is more comprehensive. Parliament contributes to a day-to-day testing of public decisions in debate (Manin, 1995; Mill, 1972) that can inform more intermittent judgements voters make in exercising public control through elections. Parliamentary scrutiny can provide those who are bound or affected by a policy or law with a right to a justification (Forst, 2007). It can contribute to losers' consent by identifying what justifications would need to be challenged by those seeking to reverse policy or law. But it is easier for executives to scale up to shared decision-making beyond the state than for parliaments to scale up their scrutiny.

2.5. A Civil Society

Civil society can be defined as follows:

> A sphere of social interaction between economy and state, composed above all of the intimate sphere (especially the family), the sphere of associations (especially voluntary associations), social movements, and forms of public communication. Modern civil society is created through forms of self-constitution and self-mobilization. (Cohen & Arato, 1995, p. ix)

Essential for the constitution of civil society are rights protecting citizens from undue state incursions combined with political participatory rights enabling citizens' organization and activation. A civil society that enables social groups to organize to influence political institutions is therefore important to the "ecosystem" of representation.

In a viable civil society, interest representation can supplement formal representation based on one person, one vote, which may not differentiate the salience of policies for different groups. Some may be hardly affected; others may see their lives turned upside down by policies. But interest representation has its own inequalities. Not all groups are equally able to organize themselves to represent interests (Olson, 1965). That difficulty is acute where interests may need to organize beyond the comfort zone of democratic states to influence complex and unfamiliar forms of decision-making beyond the state.

2.6. A Public Sphere

Public sphere can be defined as "a network of communicating information and points of view…the streams of information are, in the process, filtered and synthesized in such a way that they coalesce into bundles of topically specified *public* opinions" (Habermas, 1996, p. 360, emphasis in the original). A representative ecology needs a formal and informal public sphere capable of challenging tyrannies of public opinion; and a formal component where representatives elected on a basis of one person, one vote, can test justifications for law during legislation itself (Habermas, 1996, p. 170). A public sphere can, however, only contribute to an ecology of representation if media ownership is neither oligarchic nor autocratic.

2.7. Demos

A properly working representative ecology requires agreement on who should have votes and voice in electing representatives and a public which understands itself as represented in decisions binding on all. A current discussion, perhaps especially in the EU, is how far a demos needs to be a particular group of people as opposed to any people prepared to make shared decisions by democratic procedures and communication (Habermas, 1996, pp. 135–136). In our view, a demos has agency and gets it through other elements in a representative ecology: rights, votes, choice, voice, and law. These are not pre-political or steeped in a distinct ethnic identity.

2.8. A Rule of Law and Democratic Constitutionalism

Provisions defining and guaranteeing the process of representation are crucial for a democratic system of representation. Its very ecological character means that all elements that contribute to an overall system of representation must be safeguarded by a rule of law and a democratic constitution (Waluchow & Kyritis, 2023).

A process of scaling up democracy to the EU level will be consistent with the baseline criteria under each of the elements of the representative ecology. Nation-states vary considerably in how electoral and party systems are structured and operate, in the nature and relations between executive and parliament, in interest representation, in the workings of the public sphere, and in the role of rights and constitutionalism. But, despite the variation, most comply with the basics we have outlined under each element. Deviations from these are not necessarily undemocratic but can be. Rescaling is not equivalent to democratic decline or undermining but raises questions about democratic character and quality.

3. Scaling Up Versus Rescaling Representative Democracy in the EU Context

Scaling up democracy entails that the conditions for workable democracy are "lifted up" from the member state to the EU level. This is how much of the debate on the EU's democratic deficit presents the EU's democratic challenge: to ensure that the representative-democratic arrangements at the EU level (the election system, the European Parliament [EP], and the EU political parties) mimic those arrangements familiar from the nation-state context. For a process of scaling up to mimic the nation-state context, it is however not enough to establish an EP. That must be embedded in a much wider democracy-supporting representative ecology, organized along the lines presented in the previous section.

The general literature on rescaling defines it as follows:

> The migration of economic, social, and political systems of action and of regulation to new spatial levels, above, below, and across the nation-state. These levels are not sealed or clearly separable as in the old nation-state paradigm, but inter-related and usually contested, as space becomes a factor in modes of production, distribution, and social and national identities, while the nation-state appears to be losing its regulatory capacity and ability to manage space. (Keating, 2013, p. 6; for similar arguments see also Gualini, 2006; Somerville, 2004)

This body of literature focuses on territorial, functional, and institutional factors, and does not address representative systems or ecologies. Rescaling resonates with the large literature on multilevel governance, but which has focused far more on deliberative than representative democracy (Bohman, 2007). The notion of "trickle-down democracy" (Beetz et al., 2025) also identifies limitations on the EU's ability to scale up democracy from the national level. But, unlike this article, it does not use the concept of rescaling, nor does it assess how the limits to scaling up manifest themselves along the elements of the representative ecology.

The following reasons have persuaded us to distinguish between scaling up and rescaling and to put that distinction front and center of this article. First, as already noted, scaling up representative democracy from one level to another is not simply a matter of uploading core representative-democratic arrangements and institutions: elections, parliaments, and political parties. All these institutional arrangements are embedded within a wider representative ecology of civil society, public sphere and media, democratic community, rule of law, and constitutionalism. All these elements are essential for how representative democracy functions within the nation-state context. A full scaling up will therefore involve not only entrenching the entire ecology at the EU level, but also ensuring that all the elements making up the ecology are equally structured, equally related to each other, and operate in the same manner, as in properly working democratic nation-states.

Second, whereas scaling up is about uploading familiar and tried arrangements to the EU level, the EU level itself is not a familiar setting. The EU is clearly more than and different from an international organization. But at the same time, it is less than and different from a nation-state. As a composite of supranational and intergovernmental traits, the EU presents a distinctive challenge of rescaling representative democracy.

Third, any effort at scaling up representative democracy from the nation-state to the EU level confronts the institutional and cultural diversity of the EU's member states (the EU contains federations, quasi-federal, and unitary states with different electoral and party systems). To illustrate: Which model of parliamentary governance should be privileged when the EU also contains the French presidential model? Given this diversity, a direct scaling up of the institutional arrangements of any one single member state to the EU level might seem oppressive and insensitive. The EU's character as a compromise-seeking system is surely better suited to institutional arrangements with bits and pieces from different states (combined with some unique features that reflect the EU's non-state character). Sensitivity to national institutional diversity is entrenched in Article 4.2 of the Treaty on European Union (2016), which requires the EU to respect the member states' "fundamental structures, political and constitutional, inclusive of regional and local self-government."

Fourth, any effort at scaling up representative democracy to the EU level must acknowledge that EU integration transforms member state democracies. Thus, what is available for scaling up is already affected

and reshaped by the EU. Thus, the more the EU integrates and the more national democracies are affected by the EU, the less democratization of the EU will be a process of mimicking and the more it will be experimental.

Our notion of rescaling is more open-ended than scaling up, which we tie to copying and emulation of familiar traits. This does not rule out instances of copying and emulation (see Rittberger's analysis of the development of the EP in Rittberger, 2005). Adopting familiar arrangements in an unfamiliar setting raises questions of compatibility. Using familiar vocabulary offers little assurance that an institution or practice will operate in a familiar manner in an unfamiliar environment (the EP, we will see, is an example). The key point is that we expect EU arrangements and dynamics to be distinct. For methodological reasons, we therefore need to investigate whether institutions with familiar labels operate differently at the national and European levels.

4. EU-Level Democratization: A Matter of Rescaling

In the following, we briefly assess the elements of the representative ecology against efforts at EU democratization. Efforts to establish representative democracy at the EU level are distinct from the nation-state context, and distinctness also marks efforts by member states to exert control at the EU level.

4.1. Elections: The EU's Electoral System—Basic Features

The EU is a union of representative democracies, with different electoral systems. The EU is unique amongst bodies beyond the state in having a parliament (EP) that is directly elected by citizens. EP elections are free, fair, and legally regulated (Milt, 2026). The basic legal-normative script for elections has been embedded at the EU level. This is, therefore, broadly a copying of basic election arrangements from member state democracies, even if EU arrangements resemble some member states more than others (as a proportional system, it clearly deviates from first-past-the-post).

The EP co-decides laws, budgets, and the political leadership of the Commission. The question is whether this unique context has created a system of governance where elections operate according to the same dynamics and provide the same outcomes to be expected from scaling up democracy to the EU level. One reason for seeing European elections as a rescaling rather than a scaling up is that EP elections are often dominated by domestic politics (Hix & Cunningham, 2026; Reif & Schmitt, 1980). Turnout remains low, and citizens generally use European-level elections to pass judgements on their national leaders rather than on European leaders or issues. Rescaling is a more apt term than scaling up, given that the second-order character of EP elections limits how well they structure voter choice and debate around alternative ways of using the powers of the Union. Second-order elections also effectively short-circuit public control. The domestic focus limits how far European elections are decided by promises for the next parliament (ex-ante control) or judgements on decisions during the last EP (ex-post control). In addition, when European elections revolve around national leaders and national issues, they disrupt the national electoral cycle. The implication is that European elections activate multiple constituencies (EU level and member state level) in unclear ways.

An important question is how firmly entrenched such a pattern is. What would it take to move to parties that contest in European elections on European questions? That would represent a scaling up of control, choice, and competition to the Union level. Recent elections indicate possibilities. Politicization of European

issues does seem to stimulate voter interest (Braun, 2021; Risse, 2014). Those who feel unrepresented in European elections can move their support to challenger parties (Bartels, 2023). Parties may demarcate clearer constituency bounds by taking different positions on EU issues in European and national elections (Braun & Schmitt, 2020). A Europeanisation of debate on the legitimacy and identity of the EU can occur where the Union appears to be threatened, as it arguably was by Brexit in 2019 and by populism during the 2019 and 2024 elections (Galpin & Trenz, 2019).

It is also possible to consider cleavage convergence across levels as a sign of scaling up of representation to the European level. After all, the left–right cleavage matters at both levels. In this case, EU elections upload to the European level a cleavage that is common to its member state democracies and fits well with the powers of the EP (Schmitt & Thomassen, 2000). On the other hand, the more prominent the GAL–TAN (green-alternative-libertarian versus traditional-authoritarian-nationalist) cleavage becomes as part of a mobilization of the radical right against the EU, the more similar EP and national elections may be as contestations of the EU (Hooghe & Marks, 2018; Kriesi et al., 2006).

In sum, the EU has scaled up the procedural and institutional hardware for conducting elections, but since elections remain mainly second-order, this is more of a rescaling than a scaling up. It is also important that European-level rescaling encompasses the national level when European questions become a part of voter choice in national elections. Hutter and Kriesi (2019) detect a politicization of domestic election campaigns by European issues after the early 2000s. Other studies suggest such effects are linked to the size and, therefore, the importance of member states in EU decision-making (Jurado & Navarrete, 2021). The ease with which votes can be cast on EU questions also depends on the match between the positions of voters and parties on EU policies (Jurado & Navarrete, 2021).

When EU questions are internalized into national elections, there will also be structural difficulties in attempting to control one political system through the representative system of another. The intertwining of European and national elections (cf. Beaudonnet et al., 2024) may be the strongest evidence of a rescaling.

4.2. Parties

EU parties have formed in the EP, but they are largely absent from the electoral arena. Here, as with the previous point on elections, there is only partial copying or scaling-up, hence a different dynamic more aptly termed rescaling. Member states form the constituencies—and, therefore, the main battlegrounds—for those competing to represent voters. With few exceptions, only national parties contest European elections. Voters do not get a choice between European parties focused on representing citizens in the exercise of the powers of the Union.

This difference may have some advantages in an EP that is something of a representation of national party delegations—especially national parties of opposition that are not represented in the Council—and not just of European party groups (Lord, 2021).

The downside, however, is that continued contestation of European elections by national parties has likely limited the evolution within the EU's representative ecology of a European party system fully adapted to—and specialized in—the representation of citizens in the powers and opportunities of the Union itself. Absence from

electoral politics—where the main relationships between represented and representatives are formed—may also have constrained the evolution of a European party system that is differentiated from national parties and, therefore, able to provide a form of representation at the EU level that adds value to representation at the national level (Andeweg, 1995). Finally, the incongruence between European parties in the parliament and national parties that structure voter choice in EP elections creates its own representative disconnect between the national and Union levels: MEPs are elected as representatives of national parties but—when they use the powers of the EP to influence the policies and laws of the Union—they work in European party groups that are little known to voters and, therefore, only obliquely responsible to them.

Further impetus for rescaling may come from the following developments within national systems across Europe (and beyond): (a) the rise of cartel parties (Katz & Mair, 1995, 2009); (b) the social dislocation of parties (Mair, 2013); and (c) the rise of anti-system and radical right (and left) parties. Rescaling may occur through parties being less reliable building blocks than before. This is a structural development that places obvious but still under-examined constraints on the scope for a scaling up of parties to a full-fledged party system at the EU level.

When discussing elections, we underlined that national parties also contest European elections. National parties have therefore largely retained their monopolies of representation in the electoral arena. But this is part of a rescaling with significant costs to many national party systems because of how anti-system and "uncoalitionable" parties such as Alternative für Deutschland, Le Front National (now Rassemblement National), and the UK Independence Party owed much of their ability to disrupt national party systems to breakthroughs in European elections. Given the risks and difficulties of politicizing EU questions within national party systems where cleavages have been formed on other questions than European integration, many national parties have preferred to evade or gag discussion of European questions, rather than run the risks of internal splits or even voter realignments. But the "not in front of the children" approach of some parties may have inhibited full and frank debate and prevented the evolution of systems of party choice which allow all opinions on European integration to feel represented. The effect has been a greater interweaving of levels of governance and representation, as an intrinsic part of the process of rescaling.

4.3. Executive and Legislative Leadership

The EU is a supranational system of governance that is equipped with executive, legislative, and judicial powers. The way these are configured is reflective of a partial or uneven structure of representative democracy that is more akin to rescaling than scaling up. One important source of rescaling lies in the EU's institutional system, which is distinctly bifurcated.

There is, on the one hand, the community system, which is composed of the European Commission, the Court of Justice of the European Union, the EP, and the Council as the core institutions. This arrangement's main functional realm is the internal market and flanking policies. Within this system, the EP has, broadly speaking, co-decision powers with the Council, and there are mechanisms for holding the Commission to account. But the EP can only veto and not choose the president and College of Commissioners. The Spitzenkandidaten system attempted a remedy. Under that procedure, which was only used in 2014 and has since been abandoned, the lead candidate of the European party with the most votes in European elections would be appointed Commission president.

On the other hand, post-Maastricht, the so-called union system emerged. It is mainly composed of the Council and the European Council as the core institutions, which coordinate security and defense and other core state functions (for the distinction between these two systems, see Fabbrini, 2015, 2019; Puetter, 2014). The EP's role in the union system is quite marginal.

Even within the community system, there is only an indirect link between contests for the people's vote and appointment of elected representatives to leading positions in the institutions that exercise the executive powers of the Union. This is amplified by the fact that the EU's executive is divided across several institutions, with the Commission, the Council, and the European Council all having executive functions. Within this system, the European Council, which is composed of the EU's heads of state and government, is not as a body accountable to any other institution (Fabbrini, 2019). Weiler's (1997, p. 275) remark still stands to the effect that there is "no real sense in which the European political process allows the electorate to take what is often the only ultimate power left to the people which is to replace one set of governors with another." Many decisions are so inclusive of diverse actors—the Commission, large majorities of both member governments and the EP, and informal policy networks—that it is often hard to attribute responsibility to anyone.

Within this realm, the rescaling that takes place at the EU level is intrinsically linked to how member state democracies participate in Union decisions through their elected governments. The appointment of elected representatives to leading executive positions in member states automatically entails participation in the European Council and Council. Elected governments participate intimately from conception to implementation of Union decisions. They have a "night and day" presence in Union institutions. They play a large part in the exercise of the very powers their member states have conferred on the Union (Lindseth, 2010).

Yet, as noted above, this form of rescaling hardly provides public control with political equality through the representative institutions and politics of member state democracies. Even though each national government is elected, collective oversight by national executives risks executive domination (for this notion, see Fossum & Laycock, 2021). It is therefore unclear how far the huge role of elected governments of member states in Union decisions is a means of providing control, rather than a part of the power relations that need control.

The structural imbalance with national executives directly included in EU-level decision-making puts national parliaments in a quandary. They may either support further EU-level democratization or engage more directly with EU affairs. Insofar as they pursue the latter, they reinforce the rescaling dynamic. Non-involvement is loss of control.

4.4. Parliamentary Oversight

Parliamentary oversight is meant to overcome asymmetries of information (Krehbiel, 1991), and in the EU context national parliaments face such asymmetries both at the EU and national level. And whereas the EU's member states vary considerably in their abilities to conduct oversight (see contributions in Crum & Fossum, 2013), at the EU level this problem is structural and related to the EU's institutional and constitutional make-up.

The EU's distinct structure makes it into a "semi-parliamentary" order (Magnette, 1999). As noted, whereas the EP co-decides under the community method, this does not extend to the union system, where it is only consulted, notably on foreign and security policies. The EU's supranational community system has adopted some elements of what we associate with state-based democracy, but this is functionally confined to the internal market and flanking areas. The union system, which deals with core state powers, bears closer resemblance to interstate diplomacy (the European Council has roots in the system of interstate diplomacy, cf. Werts, 2008; Wessels, 2016).

The EU has, particularly during the crises of the last two decades, experienced an "integration paradox," with the EU's realm of action expanding but without this resulting in a commensurate transfer of powers and competences to the EU's supranational institutions (Bickerton et al., 2015; Puetter, 2014). The integration paradox is intimately linked to the increased role and presence of the European Council in EU decision-making, especially during crises, which is its special prerogative. The distinct combination of (a) supranational decision-making with an explicit democratic imprint, and (b) increased EU-level coordination of national policymaking with a less explicit democratic imprint, testifies to this overall process being a case of rescaling democracy rather than scaling up. The de facto interweaving of decision systems (or what Wessels, 1997, 2016, has termed fusion of levels of governance) underlines that there is rescaling of systems of representation of both levels, the European and the national.

The interweaving of levels in the EU context makes increased national parliamentary involvement in EU affairs less of an open choice and more of a recognized need to counter structural imbalances in the multilevel EU configuration. There are also concrete measures that testify to how national parliaments actively engage in further rescaling. One concrete example is the Early Warning Mechanism introduced by the Lisbon Treaty (Bellamy, 2019; Cooper, 2015). It allows national parliaments to challenge EU proposals on grounds of subsidiarity but is a power that groups of national parliaments (30 percent for a yellow card and 50 percent for an orange card) can only use together. Through the Conference of Parliamentary Committees for Union Affairs of Parliaments of the European Union (COSAC), national parliaments interact among themselves and with the EP. Some analysts have suggested that this is a fledgling parliamentary field (Crum & Fossum, 2009, 2013), further testimony to the experimental dimension of EU rescaling of representative democracy.

4.5. Interest Representation and Civil Society

A viable civil society is a key ingredient in the broader ecology of representation. This is, as noted above, both a sphere of action that is legally and politically differentiated from the political system and a system of interest representation. The EU has elements of both. The EU Treaties, including the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union and the provisions on EU citizenship, provide the legal framework for differentiating out a distinct civil society sphere. In addition, there is a plethora of interest organizations working to influence EU policy-making. The EU's transparency register lists 16,942 organizations (EU, n.d.). Close to three-quarters of these are commercial and one-quarter are listed as non-commercial interests.

There are two main reasons for considering the development of an EU civil society a matter of rescaling rather than scaling up. The first is because EU citizenship and EU rights (especially the four freedoms) have such a strong transnational thrust. EU citizenship rights are first and foremost tailored to second-country

nationals, those moving between the EU's member states (Bauböck, 2007; Olsen, 2014). The transnational thrust is more directed towards member states and societies opening themselves up to each other than towards orchestrating a civil society directed towards the EU level. This is also reflected in the second point, namely that among the EU's institutions it is the Commission that "has been the driving force to attribute CSOs [civil society organizations] a key role in EU governance, and, consequently, the issue of civil society representation essentially concerns the relation between civil society and the Commission" (Kohler-Koch, 2010, pp. 108–109). The complex associational structure approaching the EU delivers "synthetic or 'astroturf' representation" (Kohler-Koch, 2010, pp. 108–109). Many of these interest organizations are aggregates with loose connections to their members; hence the label astroturf representation, testifying to a relatively weak EU embedding in civil society. This is also reflected in the workings of EU elections, which, at least until recently, have had a strong second-order element. The EU institutional system's strong embedding in the member states also makes it more difficult for the EU institutions to direct civil society organizations to the EU level. All of these factors testify to a rescaling process.

4.6. Public Sphere

The public sphere can be viewed as the communicative infrastructure of civil society. The question that has been debated for decades already is whether the EU consists of 27 separate publics or whether these are showing signs of converging. Politicization through Europe's crises prompted Risse (2014) to claim the following:

> Transnational cross-border communication in Europe—at the levels of both the elites and bottom-up social mobilization—is enabled through the gradual Europeanization of national- as well as issue-specific public spheres....European public spheres do not emerge above and beyond local-, national-, or issue-specific public spheres in some abstract supranational space but rather through the Europeanization of these various public spheres that then allows for cross-border communication in Europe. (p. 3)

Risse's argument about the structuring of the European public sphere is that it develops less along supranational and more along transnational lines, which means that public spheres remain anchored in the member states (Risse, 2014). The transnational dimension highlights important horizontal (member state to member state) and diagonal (member state to EU-level and EU to member state) dynamics wherein national publics open themselves up to each other. This sits well with what was said about EU citizenship's transnational character, with the same logic applying to civil society dynamics.

These observations testify to a process of rescaling that runs across the elements of the ecology of representation. In this context, Euroscepticism can be a paradoxical challenge to any purely national "framing" of public debate on the Union. One study of the traditional print media in six countries finds that 70 percent of articles mentioning Euroscepticism frame it as more than relevant to domestic politics (Segesten & Bossetta, 2019). Another study uses Facebook posts by political parties across all 27 member states between 2019 and 2023 to show that external security threats may have contributed to a Europeanisation of public debate (Sojka et al., 2025). Thus, even with regard to Eurosceptics who want to scale down the EU, the rescaling logic is shaping their outlooks and operations.

4.7. Demos

The rescaling logic also operates on the notion of European demos. Rescaling is not the same as saying that the EU lacks a demos or a public that sees itself as a democratic people capable of making decisions binding on one another through their elected representatives (for explicit statements of the so-called no demos thesis, see Grimm, 1995; Weiler, 1995). The no demos thesis is foremost directed at the broader ecology, and not the representative institutions, as such. The claim is that the lack of a common language and other common cultural traits will prevent institutions from operating democratically. This line of argument downplays the role that political institutions and political order can play in forging democratic community, a line of reasoning that is familiar from state formation and nation-building. The EU has some of these institutions, but they have a weaker grip on citizens and societies, and the EU's embedding in the member states makes it more difficult to single out a distinct European demos, because many of the institutional arrangements, and not least European citizenship, have a strong transnational orientation.

The EU's strong transnational orientation makes it important for member states to exert democratic control of the EU. This process or dynamic is consistent with the notion that the EU is developing a "demoicracy," or, in other words, a democratic political community of democratic political communities. In effect, then, the debate on "demoicracy" is a debate over the terms of rescaling. Nicolaïdis (2013) asks what principles should guide those who want to "govern themselves together but not as one." That aspiration is precisely about the form rescaling should take, and involves therefore some element of shared political community (see also Cheneval & Nicolaïdis, 2017; Cheneval & Schimmelfennig, 2013).

4.8. Rights and Constitutionalization

We have already underlined that EU citizenship has a strong transnational orientation. That amounts to a rescaling dynamic that is echoed throughout the EU's institutional arrangements and societal and public sphere orientation. It would therefore be surprising if a similar logic didn't also permeate the EU's legal and constitutional dimension.

Formally speaking, the EU is an international organization. Nevertheless, most analysts refer to its legal order in constitutional terms, and EU law is guided by the core precepts of supremacy and direct effect (in those areas where the EU is conferred competence). The rejection of the Constitutional Treaty and its replacement with the Lisbon Treaty removed all explicit references to a constitution. This process affirmed rather than changed the fact that the EU has a material constitution, which is not a formal or democratic constitution. Material constitution refers to "*the norms of social interaction* that are regarded as basic norms according to social practice…[or] what social actors regard as the *basic norms* of the given society" (Menéndez, 2004, p. 111, emphasis in original). The member states continue to consider themselves the "masters of the treaties" since they have not agreed to confer on the EU *Kompetenz-Kompetenz* or the power to determine its own competence. Since this constitutional arrangement is imbued with basic rights and is steeped in the core precepts of the rule of law, it fits well into the story of rescaling we present here.

The rescaling thrust stems from how the EU's legal and constitutional system was from the outset authorized by member states through distinct provisions in the national constitutions (Fossum & Menéndez, 2010). Such a structure presupposes that all member states are and function as constitutional democracies,

and are co-responsible for the EU's multilevel democratic character. It is precisely this strong member state responsibility (with member states continuing to assert that they are the EU's constitutional chaperones) that testifies to this being a process of rescaling. This arrangement has a built-in vulnerability that has been readily apparent in the rule-of-law crisis. The problem of legal backsliding is not only a matter for the state concerned. The EU's legal and constitutional structure shows that there are limits to how far any one member democracy can bind itself to joint decisions when public control with political equality depends on member states that no longer respect basic rights or uphold democratic principles and procedures. Joint control of shared decisions by member democracies, therefore, entails guarantees, defined and controlled at the European level, against democratic backsliding, a European level that is in turn entirely dependent on member states helping and supporting efforts to control.

5. Conclusion

The purpose of this article was to analyze the process of scaling up representative democracy to the EU level. The EU understands itself as a Union of democratic states, all of which are representative democracies. The question was therefore how and to what extent existing democracies are willing to confer democracy on binding supranational institutions. That question has obsessed policy-makers, scholars, and publics for decades already. This article has underlined that even if we can discern two main approaches to European-level democracy in the literature, with one supranational strategy based on EU-level democratization and the other an intergovernmental one based on national democracies developing measures to control what is going on at the EU level, this is not a matter of choosing between two separate strategies. Since the EU embodies a mixture of supranational and intergovernmental traits, a more apt approach is to consider how the two interact in an EU marked by highly inter-imbricated levels of governance.

We have concluded this because EU-level democratization is less a matter of scaling up and more a matter of rescaling democracy, and that process is intrinsically related to the EU level and member states alike. It is precisely a consequence of their inter-imbrication. We outlined reasons for why this is a matter of rescaling rather than scaling up and assessed how that manifests itself across the entire ecology of representation.

EU democratization is a matter not simply for the basic representative-democratic institutions (elections, parties, and parliaments); it revolves around the whole ecology of representation. Existing accounts of representative ecology have tied it to the nation-state. The EU is neither a state nor a nation; hence, even if familiar types of institutional arrangements are chosen, there is little assurance that they will operate in familiar ways when placed in unfamiliar circumstances. Europe's diversity makes any direct scaling-up process complex: Which arrangements to choose and who does the choosing? The EU's development has also transformed the member states; hence, what is scaled up to the EU level cannot simply be a copy of arrangements we find in the member states. In a similar manner, the efforts that member states have taken to control the EU level are equally shaped by the rescaling dynamics.

The choice is not one of scaling up versus rescaling. Even public control of the EU through its member state democracies requires a rescaling of how the components of representative democracy relate to one another within member states. Nor is the choice even one between two forms of rescaling. Rather, we need to understand how supranational and intergovernmental rescaling depend on one another. Each is a part of what the other needs to satisfy the full ecology of conditions for representative democracy.

Future research should examine in more detail what this rescaling entails for our understanding of democracy in theory and practice. That includes assessments of how and in what sense the EU's nature and development enable and constrain rescaling and what that implies for democracy.

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