Professionalization of groups - Friend or Foe of Grassroots Representation

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**ABSTRACT** This paper problematises the supposition that there is a trade-off between the European Commission’s recognition of advocacy groups and group representativeness. Scholars detect group leaderships at EU-level develop into professional elites isolated from their rank-and-file and representation structures become centralized. They conclude professionalization takes place at the cost of representativeness, which in turn confounds the Commission’s intentions to bridge the gap with civil society. This paper challenges the underlying concept of organisational representativeness and argues that legitimate representation can be based on social representativeness - the acceptance of the leadership as being representative by its constituency. Based on role definitions, constituencies and internal communication structures it is reasoned that group representativeness is not necessarily derived from democratic participation, but also from expertise, organisational credibility and trust. Professionalization indeed has the potential to improve representativeness and hence does not pose an obstacle to the Commission’s strategy by definitional fiat.

**KEY WORDS** Advocacy groups, organisational representation, representativeness, solidarity groups
INTRODUCTION

After experiencing a legitimacy crisis, the European Commission (Commission) embarked on a strategy aiming to enhance its legitimacy through forging closer relations with advocacy groups, in order to ‘bridge the gap’ with civil society. This strategy is predicated on the assumption that advocacy groups are representative organizations where the leadership reflects the interests of the members and supporters. Recent group scholars are raising concerns with regards to groups’ ability to be representative and hence act as democratizing agents for the Commission.

This paper criticises the narrow understanding of representativeness in the existing literature and problematises in particular the membership-logic of representativeness as yardstick for evaluating the democratizing potential of advocacy groups. Before one can measure representativeness, it is crucial to open up the dynamics of representation and ascertain who or what groups actually represent and how they do it. Do members elect their leadership to represent their interests one-on-one, or does the leadership represent interests that members support? Is representativeness necessarily based on membership participation, or can members and supporters be represented through alternative modes? Who benefits from the interests represented, the members and supporters specifically, the wider society, or the future society? The argument here is that the diverse dynamics of representativeness require a more nuanced assessment of what makes a group representative and what criteria need to be applied to evaluate their democratizing potential. Firstly, membership-logic does not do justice to cause groups whose representativeness works according to logic of ‘solidarity’ (cf O’Neill 2001; Halpin 2006). Also, representativeness does not necessarily require the construction of a representative claim by the members. Group leadership can equally make a legitimate claim that people choose to support as representing their interests (Saward 2006). Secondly, this paper promotes the consideration of social legitimacy criteria in the judgement of groups’
representativeness and hence groups potential as legitimizing agents. *Social representativeness* is the acceptance of groups’ representativeness in the eyes of the constituency, in other words the social validity of a representative claim; and is based on expertise and organisational credibility. Thirdly, there are a number of ways outside formal participation structures for a group to be mutually responsive to the interests of affiliates as well as the public, create spheres for deliberation, social capital and ultimately help build a sense of identification with the EU. These alternative channels of representativeness provide advocacy groups with democratizing potential despite and at times indeed because of professionalization of the leadership.

**THE LEGITIMISING POTENTIAL OF ADVOCACY GROUPS**

The overarching research question of this paper is, whether advocacy groups can enhance the democratic legitimacy of the EU, in particular of the Commission. This question is situated in the wider context of the EU democratic deficit debate, which largely renders EU representative democracy deficient. The more specific context with regards to the Commission is its perceived legitimacy crisis as a result of the failed Maastricht and Lisbon referenda and the fraud allegations of the Santer Commission (Saurugger 2008a:151). This context has shifted the focus from representative to participatory democracy. Participatory theory bases advocacy groups’ democratizing potential on the argument that a stimulation of political and civic engagement can balance out assumed deficiencies in modern representative democracy structures (Maloney 2006:99). Interest group pluralism is supposed to provide enhanced participation opportunities by recognizing diverse interests in the form of interest groups, whose opinions are taken into account in the decision-making processes alongside the traditional mechanism of parliamentary or assembly votes (Czempiel and Rosenau 1992; Schulze 1994). Participation is based on the ‘principle of democratic self-governance’ (qv Communities 2002:5), which implies
that all affected interests have to have equal opportunities to represent themselves in the decision-making process of these decisions (Steffek and Nanz 2008:10).

How groups can enhance EU democratic legitimacy is based on assumptions that firstly, they provide citizens with the opportunity to influence political decision-making by channelling and representing citizens’ interests in political deliberations and decision-making (Curtin 1999; Sudbery 2003:86). They act as intermediaries or transmission belts between the EU citizens and EU decision-makers (Kissling and Steffek 2008:208). Interest groups are considered to give citizens more and specific opportunities to participate in politics beyond the electoral vote. Citizens can choose when and where to get active which in turn enhances their satisfaction with participatory opportunities (Maloney 2006:99). Secondly, groups raise awareness about EU and international level issues, creating public space for deliberation (Warleigh 2001; Finke 2005). They publicly communicate and deliberate, voice citizens concerns and force issues on or up the political agenda (Warren 2001:70-93; Steffek, Kissling et al. 2008). Civil associations are moreover believed to have developmental effects, in other words civil associations help to educate citizens in political skills and civic virtues (Putnam 2000). Thirdly, groups help building a transnational identification (Keck and Sikkink 1998; Sudbery 2003). The combination of these roles is supposed to create a ‘sense of ownership’, an identification with the EU, ultimately ensuring stability (Sudbery 2003:95).

In context with the EU, the attention of participatory scholars is predominantly on the Commission, since its mandate to represent the common interest of the EU means it has to engage with stakeholders. Because the Commission has the right to initiate legislation and the Parliament enters the legislation process at a rather late stage, the Commission has also been the main institutional focus of groups’ activities in their attempt to influence political decision-making. It is thus not surprising that it is the Commission that explicitly calls for the enhancement of democratic legitimacy
through bridging the gap with civil society (Communities 2001; for empirical studies cf. Eriksen and Fossum 2002:402; Kohler-Koch and Finke 2007:217), in an “attempt to legitimate itself and its functions” (Smismans 2003:481). Whilst the Commission was initially focussed just on the improvement of the quality of policy output, the failure of the Maastricht Referendum in Denmark and its near failure in France in 1992 led the Commission to also considering member states’ acceptance of its policies. This is where the strategy ‘bringing the EU closer to the people’ emerged; “propagated at the 1996 Turin Summit [it] became the norm to follow by all EU institutions” (Kohler-Koch and Finke 2007:210). In its Governance Paper of 2001, the Commission argues there is increasing distrust and/or a lack of interest towards EU institutions amongst citizens and moreover citizens feel that the EU is remote and too intrusive at the same time. In order to boost citizens’ confidence in the EU, the Commission proposed to get the EU closer to the people. To give a voice to civil society’s views, the Commission aims to strengthen the role of ‘civil society organisations’ (CSOs) as facilitators of a broad policy dialogue. It does so for example via online consultations and advisory groups. The idea is that CSOs aggregate and channel the diverse interests of the European citizens.

However, amongst academics, great optimism about the contribution advocacy groups are able to make to the legitimacy of political decision-making processes at European as well as national level has recently started to suffer. Scholars criticise groups’ ability to bring the EU closer to the citizens (Smismans 2002). They believe as EU-groups or rather their leaderships become recognised as political actors, they become more and more professional and as a result lose their representativeness (Saurugger 2006). In other words, it is assumed that groups put the majority of their time and resources into ‘logic of influence’ activities at the cost of ‘logic of membership’ (cf Schmitter and Streeck 1999). Groups at EU-level have to act well structured and efficient to fulfil the Commission’s expectations and function as
representative promoters of civil society interests as well as ‘schools of democracy’ (Maloney 2009a:2). This principle however is assumed to be at odds with the requirements of groups to act representative and democratically legitimate (cf. Saurugger 2006; Maloney 2008; Kohler-Koch 2008a; Maloney 2009a). A professionalization of groups is detected at the international (cf. Keck and Sikkink 1998), the EU (cf. Lahusen and Jauß 2001; Saurugger 2006) as well as at national levels (cf. Jordan and Maloney 1997; Frantz and Martens 2006:62-77; Kristan 2007).

Civil society group literature claims that as groups become more professional they lose the ability to speak for their rank-and-file, due to changes in their internal organization (cf. Saurugger 2006; Kristan 2007; Maloney 2008; Kohler-Koch 2008a; Maloney 2009a). In particular, the institutional approach to engagement is supposed to lead to a tendency of groups towards less reliance on grassroots and increasing dependence on experts as well as elite-level contacts over time, referred to as professionalization (Saurugger 2006; Frantz 2007). In addition to their political message, good performance and marketing as well as political campaign management, in particular lobbying, are said to have moved to the centre of group activities, thereby neglecting grassroots connections and membership communication (Jordan and Maloney 1997; Lahusen and Jauß 2001; Frantz and Martens 2006:62-77; Frantz 2007). Frantz and Martens describe how, over the last two decades, the internal organisational structures and strategies of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have changed from voluntary organisers of temporary protest events towards business-style enterprises. Groups employ qualified full-time staff that have a professional rather than grassroots approach to their portfolios. Groups are well-organised: they pursue political-strategic planning, consider conditions of political processes, and aim to market their own brand. Ultimately the danger is that groups strive for organisational survival, rather than for the realization of political content (Frantz and Martens 2006:75ff). The fear is that this will lead to segmented and hierarchically structured civil society elites detached
from their grassroots (Saurugger 2006; Kristan 2007:63). If grassroots are not integrated in internal organisational structures, a group is considered elitist and unrepresentative. Recognition in the light of institutional opportunities and resource dependencies is hence thought to affect the ability of groups to actually act representative (Sudbery 2003:89f; cf Saurugger 2006) and consequently act as legitimacy providers for EU decision-making (Saurugger 2006; Maloney 2008; Saurugger 2008).

**RE-DEFINING REPRESENTATIVENESS: NORMATIVE AND SOCIAL CRITERIA**

This paper is arguing for a much more nuanced response to the question, whether groups can act as democratizing agents. Professionalization, detected to have an impact on groups internal organisational structures, affects different groups in very different ways. Clearly, all groups have to be effective to be considered legitimate in the eyes of political decision-makers (Interviews with Commission officials and environmental groups 2010/2011). In order to become more effective, groups adapt their organisational structures and decision-making. However, this adaptation varies depending on existing organisational structures and strategies. Federal groups might streamline their cooperation with national and sub-national member groups whilst increasing expertise. Small solidarity groups find expert niches. Large member groups might set up focus group structures to avoid bureaucracy and be more effective for example in responding to consultations. Large national solidarity groups such as the RSPB try to balance supporter expectations, whilst broadening their portfolio, in order to retain existing as well as attract new members and consequently increase political weight (Interview 2011).

Further, given the fuzzy definition of the character of groups, resembled in various labels such as NGOs, CSOs or social movements, as well as the vast normative democratizing expectations raised by sociologists, democracy scholars and
International Relations scholars (for a short overview see Halpin 2010:1-24), it appears rather impossible to respond with a flat yes or no to the question of groups’ democratic potentials (Halpin 2010:23f). Groups are indeed very different in the roles they assume, the organisational structures and strategies they take on board and the (mutual) relationship they develop with affiliates. The response to democratising expectations requires a much more systematic approach in order to understand which types of groups have got what degree of democratic credentials.

**Problems with membership-logic of representation**

It is traditionally democracy scholars and more precisely parliamentary democracy scholars who research political representation. This explains why representation has always been connected to legitimacy and specifically free and fair elections (Rehfeld 2006:18). In particular since Olson, also the legitimacy of political groups is derived from representational democracy and hence their representativeness is based on representative democracy standards (qv Halpin 2006; Kohler-Koch 2009:55). It is conceptualized as being achieved through an active membership democratically participating in the decision-making of a group. The constituency authorizes the electoral representative who is accountable to its constituency. The focus of interest group literature in terms of groups’ democratic potential has hence been on the mobilization of membership participation (Warleigh 2000; Warleigh 2001; Jordan and Maloney 2007). Therefore the impact of recognition or rather professionalization on the representativeness of advocacy groups is generally evaluated based on the assessment of internal democratic structures. This paper argues that the source of legitimacy for advocacy groups as political actors and consequently their democratizing potential have to be revisited. Groups democratising potential has to be conceptualized outside representative democracy context. It is crucial to consider groups’ roles and characteristics in participatory democracy to understand their democratising agency.
There are a number of inconsistencies with the existing normative approach towards the ability of advocacy groups to enhance EU democratic legitimacy. There is an inherent problem in conceptualizing all groups with the ‘representation through membership logic’. Most groups have no potential to be representative by membership logic (Halpin 2006:922) and often do not actually claim to represent members. Hence the existing normative definition declares the large number of advocacy groups that speak for a cause in the general interest (i.e. non-human constituencies or future generations) or in the interest of those without a voice (i.e. the sick or poor) as non-representative and consequently as having no democratizing potential. These interests, however, are part of our society and hence have a legitimate reason for representation in the political process. They form part of the pluralist interests required for a healthy democratic policy-making. To frame it in a different way: It is exclusive and violating people’s democratic rights to raise their concerns by joining associations, if the voices they give to a group are rendered unrepresentative. For some of the interests, the only chance to be represented is through groups rather than the alternative channel of political parties. The electoral cycle is ill-suited to deal with climate change for example, which requires immediate action to prevent some short, but importantly mid and long-term effects that stretch generations.

The more recent interest group literature has made some attempts to move away from the traditional understanding of representativeness and argues for a differentiation in expectations towards groups (O'Neill 2001; Halpin 2006; Halpin 2010). Scholars argue, expecting groups to be internally democratic does not take into account the empirical diversity of groups and the consequential differences in the authorization and accountability relations between group leaders and their affiliates. In other words: Some groups cannot be representative and hence cannot be expected to be internally democratic. Rather than expecting democratic structures of
representation from all groups, Halpin for example argues democratising expectations should depend on the type of group constituencies and beneficiaries. In other words, evaluation standards and criteria depend on what or who is being represented. In member groups that represent humans, these human members authorize the leadership and hold it to account. The source of legitimacy is membership representation via internal democratic structures, because the affiliates are also the beneficiaries (Halpin 2006:925). However in cause groups or so-called ‘solidarity groups’ (Halpin 2006) non-humans, such as the environment, or future generations, cannot authorize the leadership or hold it to account (O’Neill 2001:494).

“[T]wo central features of legitimisation – authorisation and presence – are absent” (O’Neill 2001:494). As Halpin argues, supporters of solidarity groups are not the beneficiaries of a group and this affects the requirements for legitimacy and internal democracy. Since the affiliates are not the ones the groups advocate for, they do not need to be consulted in determining positions. The legitimacy of solidarity groups hence does not result from representing members but from epistemic sources. The emphasis is very much on aspects such as knowledge, expertise, solidarity (experiences) or empathy with the beneficiaries (O’Neill 2001; Halpin 2006:925ff), as well as judgement (O’Neill 2001). A group speaking in the name of the environment will thus base its legitimacy on scientific studies as well as own experience or knowledge in its network. Its supporters may support this cause via campaigns, lobbying or subscriptions; they agree to help the group in its claim and actions to speak for the environment. Indeed, the case of the environment might be an example where it is important that the interest is determined through scientific research rather than purely through member opinions. Addressing the democratic deficit through enhancing group representativeness in the sense of membership-logic would exclude such groups, and may thus in fact work against the purpose of political inclusion (Halpin 2006:937). Thus, even if contestable, a ‘representation based on claims’ to speak for non-human constituencies or future generations is “the
best we can hope for” (O'Neill 2001:497).

Recent electoral representation literature similarly criticises the limited understanding of representation. Party political authors have reassessed the specific relationship between authorization and accountability; searching for new tools to analyse representation (Mansbridge 2003; Saward 2006; Saward 2009; Severs 2010). Mansbridge criticises that existing normative criteria for the judgement of accountability are all designed for one specific type of representation, ‘promissory representation’, which is about a representative keeping or failing to keep promises made to a constituency (cf Mansbridge 2003: 525). But there are other types of representation recently analysed by empirical scholars, which existing normative criteria cannot judge (Mansbridge 2003: 515). Though Mansbridge argues in the context of electoral representation, lessons can be learnt with regards to the diversity of representation dynamics and related normative criteria for advocacy groups. Mansbridge shows that representation is not as simple and straightforward, but may vary in each context. Projected to the legitimacy and accountability dynamics of advocacy group representation, Mansbridge’ representation categories suggest that there is not just membership-logic in the sense of promises being fulfilled. For example, the leadership might support policy positions that it predicts its members and supporters will agree with in hindsight (anticipatory representation). In this case, Mansbridge would emphasise the normative need for good quality of deliberation between the leadership and the constituents during the time of policy making (cf Mansbridge 2003: 525). In case of advocacy groups, transparency, deliberation, but also the support of positions and campaigns shown by members and supporters are normative indicators. Or, the group leadership might base its policy position on its own knowledge and expertise in the field and on the leaderships’ or rather the groups’ principles and common sense (gyroscopic representation). Here Mansbridge emphasises the normative need for good quality deliberation at the time of the
authorization of the leadership (cf Mansbridge 2003: 525). In the group world this requires transparency of groups, leader profiles and group principles, which provide the qualitative base for people to decide whether they support a group and its leadership. A groups’ leadership might also represent the interests beyond its own member- and supporter-ship (surrogate representation). This seems particularly apt in relation to human rights and environmental groups, who lobby for the benefit of the wider society and environment, rather than only their immediate members and supporters (Strolovitch 2007:55). Representativeness in this case cannot possibly only be measured via the participation of members. Surrogate representation is a crucial democratic function of groups, because they stand for interests of those that ‘have no voice’, i.e. on behalf of those who lack the necessary knowledge and expertise (Maloney 2009:284). Mansbridge’ normative criterion here is a proportional representation of conflicting interests as well as “the significant representation of important perspectives” (Mansbridge 2003: 525).³ Groups are seen to play a vital role in voicing uneasy and by electoral representation neglected minority interests.

The analysis above explains why judging groups’ democratizing potential based on member participation is inappropriate in a number of cases. It does not account for the diverse roles and strategies groups implement with regards to representing an issue. It is also ignorant of the – democratic - choices individuals make with regards to how they would like their interests to be represented. Crucial to the above argument is the observation that bringing citizens closer to the EU does not translate into more participation, as opposed to what is widely accepted in participatory literature. Quoting Van Wessel, “we should not mistake a will to be taken into account more, for a will to participate more” (2010:455). There are differing opinions on whether groups should require people to be actively participating in internal decision-making or not. Some scholars see participation as vital for groups
to act as ‘schools of democracy’ (Putnam 2000), whilst others feel that if people do not wish to be active then they should not be forced to (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2002). After all, the majority of people choose to limit their participation to a minimum, i.e. to monthly subscriptions or to signing petitions every once in a while, and do not wish to get engaged in group activities (Interviews 2010/2011). They choose not to be actively involved in groups that have traditional accountability mechanisms in place, or at least not to make active use of their right to authorize and hold leaders to account. They rather rely on leaders to fulfil the objective the group is committed to (qv Jordan and Maloney 1997). Groups with alternative modes of representation hence voice interests of a majority of people and “we should be more concerned if groups were not offering such opportunities” (Maloney 2009:284).

Moreover, whilst member groups have some obvious benefits in terms of political motivation and education, it is wrong to assume that solidarity groups do not desire or achieve participation and awareness. Groups inform and engage their supporters via a number of informal channels such as facebook and twitter. Groups with local outlets also try to actively engage individuals in political campaigns. However, there is a limit as to how much interest supporters and members of the public show on certain political and in particular EU issues. Whilst trying to be engaging, groups have to be responsive to the expression of their supporters’ interests, if they want to keep them attracted to their work, but also if they are supposed to be responsive to them. A social media staff member of an environmental group notes there has to be a balance between what a group wants its supporters to engage in, and what supporters want to engage in (Interviews 2010/2011). Further to this, there should also be a limit in how far groups can be expected to raise interest in specific issues and push for engagement. After all, it is the EU institutions and media’s responsibility to inform the public. Though solidarity groups do not give any internal decision-making rights to their supporters, they still put a strong emphasis on keeping their support and hence making sure that their work responds to supporters’ interests
To put it bluntly: Rendering the voice of a group like Greenpeace in EU decision-making as non-representative, because it has no internal democratic structure, would neglect the interest of all its supporters that have identified themselves with i.e. Greenpeace’s principles and position. A group representation system inclusive not only of member group interests, but also of what is called supporter, solidarity or cause group interests, includes all advocacy group interests and hence is more democratic. The construction of the representative claim has also got the potential to bridge the gap with EU citizens and enhance the democratic quality of EU decision-making. The identification with the issues Greenpeace puts forward creates a sense of transnational identification of individual citizens with general and more specific causes, as well as with the community supporting and constructing it. Greenpeace moreover educates people on specific and wider issues via a variety of direct contacts and media channels.

Social representativeness

Secondly, this study claims that part of the answer to the question whether groups can enhance the democratic legitimacy of the Commission’s decision-making lies in an aspect of legitimacy so far overlooked by interest group and participatory democracy scholars, namely social legitimacy. To determine if the Commission can ‘bridge the gap’ with local civil society through the institutional approach it is taking – that is, through the incorporation of professionalized groups in political processes to legitimize its own actions – we must look not only at normative legitimacy criteria (acceptability), but also take into account the social legitimacy point of view (acceptance)(Dingwerth 2007:14). The answer to the question whether or not professionalization undermines group ability to enhance the Commission’s legitimacy, requires the empirical assessment of the ‘social validity’ of a group and its positions: people accepting EU level groups’ decisions as rightful. Social
representativeness then is the acceptance of groups’ representativeness in the eyes of the constituency, in other words the social validity of a group’s representative claim. A group can be representative because its affiliates trust in the leadership to represent its interests. There is no requirement for internal participation in forming positions to gain trust; in fact affiliates need not even be informed about every activity of a group to believe in it representing their interests, as long as affiliates have an understanding of the role the group and its leadership play and on whose behalf the group considers itself to be active. As with gyroscopic representation, individuals need to know the principles and objectives of a group as a precondition for support and trust. In this context, it is important to remember that the core meaning of group representativeness is that the leadership has the same properties of interest as its rank-and-file and/or affiliates. These same properties of interest are not solely achievable or traceable through active member participation or rather members putting forward the cause to be represented. As Saward convincingly argues, it is not only the represented, which choose their representatives, but representatives somewhat choose, or rather ‘claim’, what and whom to represent (Saward 2006). In other words the leadership puts forward a representative claim, such as biodiversity, and people can choose to support this claim as representing their personal interest. It is argued here that social representativeness, or trust, is based on expertise and organisational credibility. Organisational credibility is reflected in the group’s media image and its popularity in society, as well as in the direct support it receives for example through subscriptions, donations and campaign support. The fact that supporters and/or members have the option to opt-out but choose to remain ‘in’ indicates a belief by members and supporters in the competence of their leadership to act in their interest. Trust is moreover apparent when groups support other member organisations in their network/hierarchy to put forward a sensible position without having actively participated in the formulation of this position. Whilst it is crucial for democratic quality that active engagement is stimulated at all levels, the work done
by elites at EU level may still form some sense of identification, because there is trust and ‘passive engagement’. Hence groups without internal democratic structures are not only legitimate political players, but also have democratizing potential. Social representativeness provides a means to enhance the democratic quality of decision-making by creating a sense of ownership and direction. Quoting Maloney, solidarity groups “activate support by individuals for collective ends” (Maloney 2009:284).

To evaluate the quality of representativeness, representation literature tends to resort to responsiveness as an indicator (Rehfeld 2006; Severs 2010). How well someone represents can only be evaluated based on the specific aims of the representative-audience relationship. Is the aim the good of society, the good of the environment or what members want? In other words, the evaluation of representation has to be done in a case-specific manner. The responsiveness of social representation, as well as gyroscopic representation, would be the overall policy portfolio and its coherence with the groups’ principles. However, the act of accepting a representative as legitimate by supporters can require varied levels and types of responsiveness. For example a person might be satisfied with reading what Greenpeace is doing about whales in Japan and support a campaign financially or by signature, but may not be interested in any further information regarding the campaign. Another person might wish to be kept in the loop about the overall activities of its group. Yet another one wants to take part in the selection of issues the group prioritises. Supporters are not all the same and they require different levels and sorts of attention. At the individual group level it becomes obvious that the representative task is not straightforward and one can suspect that the larger and more diverse the supporter-ship, the more challenging it is to respond to increasingly diverse demands.

Social representativeness moreover has implications for the interest group system as such. It indicates that group representation, regardless of specific organisational
features, may be valid and legitimate because it is accepted as such. Kohler-Koch concludes for the EU interest group system as a whole that the representative claim of EU-level groups is valid because “citizens have accommodated to the system and because the respective stakeholder audience accepts the outcome of conflict settlements as being legitimate” (Kohler-Koch 2010:112). In fact, the development of a culture of consultation and transparent decision-making at EU-level may contribute positively to the support of leadership decisions.

**IMPLICATIONS FOR GROUP PROFESSIONALIZATION**

Representation is not mere agency (Edmund Burke interpreted by Eulau, Wahlke et al. 1959:743). This is interesting in the context of professionalization and expertise. An environmental group leader who does exactly what I, as an environmental science and politics amateur, would do in her place, does not do a good job in representing me (cf Pitkin 1967:145; quoted in Rogowski 1981:396). People want professionalism and expertise in representation. Representation is not merely a fulfilment of promises, but it is crucial that advocacy groups engage in creating and, if necessary, altering promises. In the case of EU issues which are said to be remote from the citizen and often very technical and difficult to understand for the amateur, it is necessary to have a group provide information, explanation and constituency-tailored framing of issues. Take climate change for example. The complexity of the issue and the consequences for humans are not even clear to the scientists themselves, yet we do have to take political decisions. Groups help their constituents and beyond by providing different ways of framing the argument. They generate trust because their priorities and objectives are clear in their manifestos, and they often do their own or commission government- and market-independent research. They do not only challenge government positions, but also challenge and engage with citizens opinions, whether there is direct interaction or not. As an example, in the case of a no-fly zone over Libya, Avaaz listened to the vast majority of its
supporters when supporting a no-fly zone. But when a small number of supporters raised significant, reasoned concerns with this position, Avaaz put these in context and opened a discussion to re-consider its position on facebook. Avaaz thus played a crucial role in facilitating and steering a debate and introduced important perspectives of a minority that challenged the opinion of a majority. Another example is the decision for or against the building of wind turbines of the Campaign to Protect Rural England (CPRE). The group challenged its members, who were generally against the alteration of the landscape, by reasoning the necessity for the creation of more renewable energy sources. The group leadership's encompassing knowledge put member opinions in perspective of the wider societal benefits of their policy position. The leadership decided for the benefit of the wider society, rather than the beauty of the landscape to supporters (Interview 2011). Both of these examples try to show that a more dynamic - professional - representation enhances the democratic quality of decision-making, because it can create better informed opinions that are ultimately beneficial to a larger part of society. It also shows that representation does not just mean the aggregation of interests, as is often conceptualised by scholars of CSOs (qv. Kohler-Koch 2008:12f). In contrast to what is assumed in the literature, the hypothesis here is that as groups become more professionalized, this has the potential to positively affect their credibility in the eyes of supporters as legitimate representatives of their interest. Members/supporters accept decisions taken by the leadership as rightful independent from their prior active participation in building these decisions.

Formal participation structures of course have the important function to limit dangers of isolation from constituents and cooptation, in particular for EU-level groups receiving a large percentage of their budget from the Commission or governments. However, solidarity groups can make use of transparency and information tools, as well as be responsive to their affiliates through informal ways of expressing and
debating the affiliates’ and leadership’s interests. New media technology offers an abundance of potential channels that can provide the leadership of a group as well as the affiliates and broader public mutually with a sense of the general as well as specific interests, opinions and expectations of both. Expert opinions and grassroots experience can be exchanged and inform positions and support. Leaderships can provide arguments, raise awareness, as well as challenge members’ and supporters’ opinions - and vice-versa. Amongst these media technologies are websites, email lists, online conferences and social media such as vimeo, youtube, facebook, twitter forums and blogs. Moreover groups make use of online surveys and policy or focus groups to receive member and supporter views which influence policy directions (qv Maloney 2009:283f). Groups where supporters have no say in formal decision-making indeed have an incentive to be responsive to supporter views on policies in order to avoid supporter exit (Maloney 2009:283f). After all, supporters are a vital finance and legitimacy source, translating into political weight (Interviews 2010/2011).

These interactive tools moreover have the potential to enhance political inclusion by connecting individuals and communities horizontally and vertically across territorial and organisational levels, across issues and societies. Social media technologies are particularly fruitful for groups that face the challenge of remoteness between leadership and the rank-and-file. They help smaller groups to overcome restrictions of resource scarcity, because they do not require physical presence for communication. Responsiveness, political inclusiveness, the identification with political communities and informed opinion formation all do not just bring the citizen closer to EU politics, but provide potential for groups to enhance the democratic quality of the Commission’s decision-making.

The professionalization of groups in terms of their usage of communication tools, such as new ways of online participation, facilitate engagement in a way that does
not necessarily require formal membership and may even act beyond groups’ own member/supporter base. Citizens can use the internet to participate outside formal organizational structures but nevertheless impact on formal agendas of organizations (Ward and Gibson 2009:38). Taking social networks as an example, citizens can form and join groups on specific issues, thereby displaying their support for an issue that may be put forward by a group they are not formally affiliated to. Groups can be responsive to affiliates and the broader public’s preferences by responding to indications of interests and opinions in the media, such as public opinion polls or media coverage of public debates (qv. Kohler-Koch 2008:12). Groups do not only promote the interest of their members/supporters, but beyond (Frantz 2005:183). New technologies provide channels for a different type of representativeness. Hence a more professional image has the potential to increase social representativeness also with regards to the broader civil society. Based on this more inclusive re-definition of representativeness, the conclusion is that professionalization may indeed improve group representativeness – and thus the democratic quality of political decision-making.

CONCLUSION

Can the democratic legitimacy of the Commission be enhanced through the engagement with advocacy groups? This study challenges the assumptions made in the literature that recognition and in particular professionalization of groups necessarily hinders their democratizing potential. The democratizing potential of groups for political decision-making has largely been based on the normative criterion of groups being representative through internally democratic structures. This paper points to inconsistencies in the normative ‘membership logic’ approach and suggests the conception of representativeness be revisited. It is not just formal member participation that makes a group representative and hence a democratic agent. The democratic deficit debate, focussing on institutional properties, has to
truly take into account the properties of advocacy groups to understand the dynamics of their democratic agency.

Membership-logic cannot explain why supporters trust their leadership to be representative of their interests when supporters have not been formally involved in the formation of positions. Instead social representativeness, in other words organisational credibility and a groups’ expertise, explains why a group is perceived as representative by its supporters and beyond. Professional, informal channels of representation indeed provide an additional means for groups to enhance their representativeness. New media technology enhances responsiveness and identification of members and supporters with a group as well as trust outside formal participatory channels.

However, social representativeness and informal communication can only be assessed case-by-case. Which advocacy groups are representative and have democratizing potential is an empirical question, not one that can be concluded by definitional fiat. Moreover, the representativeness of claims made in consultations should be considered based on the issue in context. Qualitative empirical research is required to detect whether professionalization takes place at the cost of representativeness, or whether groups are actually both professional and representative. The paper gives preliminary empirical conclusions supporting the hypothesis that professionalization, though not necessarily and case dependent, has the potential to enhance representativeness and groups’ democratizing potential.

Though a large body of literature is taking into account pluralist understandings of how groups can enhance the democratic quality of decision making, professionalization criticism of advocacy or rather lobbying groups seems to be disconnected from the wider pluralist debate. The underlying perception of participation and group democratizing qualities in most studies is restricted to access and representation in formal participation mechanisms (Kohler-Koch and Finke
2007:214). ‘Functional participation’ (Kohler-Koch and Finke 2007:207), taking into account the contribution of civil society to the democratic quality of the entire multi-level EU-system, is largely neglected by group professionalization critics.

Worth noting is that accepting the reality of ‘professionalization’ in the sense of an increased advocacy focus as opposed to grassroots participation in itself is disputed. The assumption of the “golden era” of the ideal traditional representative organisation is contested by some (Fielding 2001:28; Ward and Gibson 2009).

Professionalization of political communication might just be a myth and we are simply experiencing the continuous modernisation of society and the adaptation of groups to resulting changes in practices and cultures, as Negrine and Lilleker argue in the case of political parties (Negrine and Lilleker 2002).

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NOTES

1 Advocacy groups are understood here as civil society organisations active in the general interest and engaged in lobbying.

2 The ‘civil dialogue’ was introduced. Several authors have covered the extent to which EU institutions and Directorate Generals have nourished and initiated the establishment of EU-level interest groups since (Greenwood 2007).

3 Mansbridge notes, financial contributions can cause ‘systemic inequities in representation’ (Mansbridge 2003:525). In group literature, the issue of financial support has been controversial. Some argue groups are over-representing the interests of the rich as well as other dominant parts of society, which works against democratic inclusion (Strolovitch 2007). At the same time, there is a redistributive element to this. Resource-rich citizens ensure interests are represented that less affluent people have strong opinions about, but who cannot afford membership costs (Maloney 2009:284).

4 Membership retaining numbers, or rather ‘revolving door membership’, may be an issue to be considered here.
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