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**Talking with the wind?**  
**Discussion on the quality of deliberation in the Ideal-EU**  
**project**

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## Introduction

The Ideal-EU project is the story of a disappointment, which could illustrate the limits of deliberative democracy itself. While it fostered the development of a good deliberation among ordinary citizens, it had no impact on public policies, and ended-up having negative civic consequences on participants, who became increasingly cynical about politics and deliberative democracy more generally. At odds with its initial ambitions, it also failed to create the conditions for a European deliberation beyond territorial and linguistic barriers.

However, the Ideal-EU project appeared at first as a best case study, for understanding how technological innovations – and especially the internet – could stimulate deliberation, free from external constraints, and eventually transcend practical limits linked to size, language or cultural resources.

Ideal-EU is a project set up by Poitou-Charentes, Tuscany and Cataluña Regional governments, financed by the European Union, to foster public discussions among European citizens – and especially youngsters – on the issue of climate change. To do so, the three Regions set up a sophisticated deliberative procedure, relying on both on-line and face-to-face participation. In autumn 2008, they set up an electronic town meeting (ETM) involving 150 young citizens in each region, which was doubled up with a dedicated interactive website for preliminary on-line discussion<sup>1</sup>. This device was aimed at producing an informed public opinion, and to transmit recommendations to the Temporary Committee on Climate Change of the European Parliament. The use of the internet – and especially of an on-line forum aimed at fostering discussions on climate change – and of video-conference during the e-town meeting was supposed to overcome the territorial barriers between the regions and to produce a truly European opinion on this crucial public issue.

The aim of our paper is to evaluate the democratic potential of such a device, to determine to what extent it can contribute to the emergence of deliberative model of European governance. More precisely, we aim at answering three research questions: (1) to what extent such a device fosters the quality of deliberation among ordinary citizens on a highly technical question such as climate change, and whether on-line or face-to-face deliberation appear more efficient from this perspective ? (2) Do such participatory innovations, as they allow deliberation beyond the local level, allow for a proper European deliberation? (3) What is the impact of such a deliberative experience on regional and European public policies?

To answer these questions, we use a wide range of methodological tools, namely (1) a field survey consisting of (1) direct observation of the e-town meeting; (2) 14 semi-directive interviews with its organizers and participants; (3) the treatment of a survey submitted to all face-to-face French participants; (4) and the coding and content analysis of both face-to-face and on-line discussions. We focus here on the French case, for which we dispose of more empirical data, but draw broader conclusions from the dynamics of this experience among the three regions.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.ideal-debate.eu>

We first offer a presentation of the genesis of the Ideal-EU experience, showing how the deliberative device was partly transferred and hybridized from the American model of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Town Meeting. We then analyse the quality of deliberation both on-line and face-to-face, based on the content-analysis of the discussions. We thus show that Ideal-EU created for the conditions of a good deliberation (in terms of inclusion, responsiveness, level of information and justification), but did not managed – mostly for practical reasons – to create a proper European deliberation. Finally, we explain why despite the high deliberative quality, this experience failed to have any significant impact on regional and European public policies. We therefore conclude on the risks such democratic experiences embody when they fail to accomplish their promises of citizens' empowerment, as they increase individuals' cynicism towards politics.

## **I. The emergence of the Ideal-EU deliberative experience: transfer and hybridization of a democratic innovation**

### *1. Project Genesis*

Spanning Catalonia, Poitou-Charentes and Tuscany, the Ideal-EU project was financed by the European Commission, through its e-participation program<sup>2</sup>. Indeed, the European Commission has financed in the past years various participatory experiences either led by a group of EU countries or by the 27 member-states together, in order to create a feeling of belonging and to build a European citizenship<sup>3</sup> (Badouard, 2009). The concept largely replicates the “21<sup>st</sup> Century Town Meetings” set up by the organization America Speaks in the US<sup>4</sup>. In the US, 21<sup>st</sup> Century Town Meetings have been organized to allow New-Yorkers to discuss the reconstruction projects of Ground Zero after 9/11 attacks (Lukensmeyer & Brigham, 2005), as well as in New Orleans to brainstorm on urban planning after Katrina (Wilson, 2008).

Although setting a European precedent, the Ideal-EU project used a model deployed by Tuscany in 2006-2007 to draft legislation on e-participation and healthcare reform (Freschi, Raffini, 2008; Florida, 2008). In the framework of this project, the actual methodology of e-participation came from Avventura Urbana<sup>5</sup> – an Italian participatory

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<sup>2</sup>- Grant Agreement No. EP-07-01-008 from the European Commission subsequent to Call for Proposals No. 2007-1. “Ideal-EU” expands into “Integrating the Drivers of E-participation at Regional Level in Europe”. See <http://www.demo-part.org>

<sup>3</sup>- Thus, in 2006-2007, six participatory democracy projects, including for some of them information and communication technologies, were financed by the European Commission in the framework of « Plan D, like Democracy, Dialogue, and Debate », launched in october 2005 by Margot Wallström, vice-president of the commission, after the French and Dutch « No » in referendums to ratify the European constitutionnal treaty.

<sup>4</sup>- See <http://www.americaspeaks.org>.

<sup>5</sup>- Avventura Urbana was founded at the beginning of the 1990s in Turin by a group of young left-wing architects with an interest in grassroots participation. It promoted a grassroots approach to architecture and urbanism with application to urban renewal projects before developing an interest in more formal mechanisms of deliberation such as the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Town Meeting, which they have applied in Italy. It organized several e-town meetings in conjunction with the Winter Olympics, peace issues and for Tuscany

urban planning firm, which made different research trips to the US to bring back ideas and experiences – largely inspired by America Speaks. However, a few innovations were brought from the original design of the 21<sup>st</sup> century Town Meeting. First of all, the town meeting was coupled with an on-line deliberation phase, prior to the town meeting, aimed at gathering comments and ideas to be discussed face-to-face.<sup>6</sup> Then, and most importantly, the Ideal-EU project aimed at overcoming the spatial limitations of the town meeting, by organizing three town-meetings simultaneously in Poitiers, Florence (actually four different ones were organized in Tuscany) and Barcelona, as well as one virtually. The aim was therefore, in this case, to overcome national and territorial limitations to reach some kind of European deliberation. However, we will see the technical and material difficulties this endeavour had to face.

## *2. A suboptimal website Design*

The Ideal-EU website went online in late August 2008.<sup>7</sup> Mostly composed of discussion forums, both moderators and registered members could start new threads and polls on issues of climate change and suggested remedies. Reference materials were also available for download and members could build Facebook-type networks of friends. The website actually broke down into four distinct language-based sites that effectively separated the Catalan, English, French and Italian components from each other, because deadlines ruled out set-up of a common multilingual platform. The umbrella website totals 1,000 members, with 700 for the French site.

This website could be seen as a meaningful example of “managed e-citizenship” described by Coleman who opposed it to the “autonomous e-citizenship”. Indeed, the IDEAL-EU website constitutes a “safe, civilized, moderated enclave(s) in which youth can learn and have their say” and whose aim is to “to cultivate “responsible” citizens [...] who are not only free to argue but to obey the rules of good argument.” (Coleman, 2008: 192).

However, the website disappointed the organizers. Hardly user-friendly or eye pleasing, the website lacked any clear identity: it was neither quite a mailing list nor a proper forum of deliberation to hammer out new discussion topics for the ETM. In retrospect, it was mostly a virtual forum for climate change buffs and bait to enlist more ETM participants. One of the main limitations of the website was however that it was disconnected from the electronic town meeting. In the end, on-line discussions had no impact on the face-to-face deliberations, while it could have constituted a pool from which to draw discussion topics or innovative proposals to be evaluated collectively. As a result, the discussions on the website were not synthesized in the final report transmitted to the European Parliament commission. Therefore, we will show later that its main

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in 2006 and 2007. As a recognized practitioner of participation methodology, its relationship to Tuscany Regional Government has made it an integral, if unofficial, partner of Ideal-EU. See <http://www.avventura-urbana.it>.

<sup>6</sup>- It has to be stressed however that America Speaks has also used on-line deliberation tools in relation to some of its experience, especially in the 2004 town meeting organized in New York to discuss the future of Ground Zero. An on-line forum was set up afterwards to specify and discuss some of the proposals made face-to-face. The distinctive feature of the Ideal-Eu project from this perspective is to have organized the on-line phase prior to the face-to-face one.

<sup>7</sup>- <http://www.idealeu-debate.eu>

function for the users has been an expressive and socializing one.

### *3. The Electronic Town Meeting (ETM)*

The tri-regional ETM held on November 15<sup>th</sup>, 2008 only loosely reflected the website content because the organizers, and not the youth, had pre-arranged the topics of the face-to-face debate. Connecting all three regional ETMs, the two morning session themes focused on (a) what is the best energy mix for 21<sup>st</sup> century Europe and (b) how can energy consumption savings be improved; while the afternoon sessions were thematic local deliberations, focused on regional transport and mobility in Poitou-Charentes, renewable energies in Tuscany and waste management in Cataluña.

ETM participants were “youngsters” between 14 to 30 years old; an age group of interest to the European Commission<sup>8</sup> and political actors in Western countries, who hope that democratic innovations may help reversing the long-term declines in civic and political participation among youth (Montgomery, 2008), although some studies have shown that e-democracy experiments are likely to be more useful in expanding the activities of youth already engaged in civic life, rather than encouraging those who do not participate to become involved (Delli-Carpini, 2000; Milner, 2009).

Furthermore, given its previous experience since 2004 with the high school participatory budget, the Poitou-Charentes regional government possessed the necessary organization and mobilization resources for this ETM (Sintomer, Röcke, Talpin, 2009). Consistent with the principles of “21<sup>st</sup> Century Town Meeting”, participants were selected for their diversity and voluntary commitment, two imperatives not always easy to reconcile. Unlike most deliberative events, ETMs enlist participants on a voluntary basis rather than random selection. Poitou-Charentes administration had therefore to campaign heavily throughout the school system before managing to gather 150 participants.

Not based on random sampling, the Ideal-EU project could not offer a representative sample of the population of three regions. In the French case, the only one for which we have reliable data, the gender breakdown was nevertheless 51.5% M/48.5% F. Despite the inclusion of youth from low-income housing districts, participants with jobless parents were slightly underrepresented, while those with white collar parents were slightly over-represented, as indicates Table 1<sup>9</sup>. Nonetheless, participation was broadly representative of the region’s blue- and petty white-collar population.

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<sup>8</sup>- The EC has long noticed that youth take scant interest in conventional politics or EU issues. In 2000, it started a number of projects to engage the 14-30 year age group in EU affairs, e.g. the European Youth Portal at [http://europa.eu/youth/enews.cfm?l\\_id=en&jsessionid=4207fdc1f2681f126e12TR](http://europa.eu/youth/enews.cfm?l_id=en&jsessionid=4207fdc1f2681f126e12TR) and, to consult on specific issues, [http://ec.europa.eu/yourvoice/consultations/index\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/yourvoice/consultations/index_en.htm). See also the EC White Paper on a “new impetus for youth” at [http://europa.eu/legislation\\_summaries/education\\_training\\_youth/youth/c11055\\_en.htm](http://europa.eu/legislation_summaries/education_training_youth/youth/c11055_en.htm), published in tandem with the White Paper on European governance (2001) that led into the “Youth in Action 2007-2013” program started in 2006.

<sup>9</sup>- We used the breadwinner’s profession as a baseline because most Ideal EU participants were secondary students or undergraduates and participant’s profession would have skewed the sample.

**Table1. Comparison of Ideal-EU participants' parents professional structure, in comparison to Poitou-Charentes'<sup>10</sup>**

	Unemployed	Cultivator	Worker	Employee/ Intermediary Profession	CEO, craftsman, shopkeeper	Intellectual professions, managers	No professional activity/ housewife
<b>Father's occupation</b>	3,2	2,1	22,1	24,2	14,7	33,7	-
<b>Male jobs in Poitou-Charentes 2005</b>	8,9	5,8	41,5	31,8	8,8	11,7	0,7
<b>Mother's occupation</b>	2,8	0,9	10,3	51,4	9,3	14	11,2
<b>Female jobs in Poitou-Charentes in 2005</b>	9,1	2,4	11,9	73,4	4	7,4	0,9

\* Sources: Insee, Enquête emploi 2006

Coming from families with a higher social status than the average of the Region's population, participants also demonstrated greater interest and awareness of environmental issues. They were also far more socially active than the student average: 49.5% reported involvement in the High School Participatory Budget; 40%, membership in a voluntary association and 27.5%, in a student organization. The impact of not using random sampling appears therefore immediately.

Each table in the ETM room gathered a facilitator and about 10 participants – one of them taking minutes on a laptop. For deliberation's quality, the procedure required facilitators to introduce debate and raise questions but remain neutral to all comments. Each one-hour session began with a 10-minute reading of the discussion booklet to acquaint participants with all sides of the issue. Given contradictory nature of the booklet content, this reading was the functional although modest equivalent of a cross-interrogation of experts by a citizens' jury. Participants then had 50 minutes of discussion time.

Discussion content from all 17 tables was fed to a theme team in Tuscany, which immediately classified them under main topic headings, with an extra “outlyer” category for original ideas and fringe opinions. Before the voting session, resulting summaries were displayed on a large information screen and read aloud. However, participants used the audiovisual presentations of summaries as rest breaks in a busy schedule and largely ignored their content. Participants then cast electronic ballots in response to five or six questions and the outcomes were displayed in real time. Unlike in 21<sup>st</sup> Century Town Meeting experiences however, the multiple choice questions were drafted beforehand by

<sup>10</sup>- Note that the sum of Male jobs and Female jobs in Poitou Charente exceeds 100%. The national statistical data used here did not include in this chart the unemployed population. We felt the need to compare both categories of active and unemployed population with our Ideal EU sample, so we added them.

the organizers and not derived from discussion content.

After the conference, all discussion summaries and poll results were synthesized into a 50-page report distributed to all participants. On November 18, a tri-regional delegation of six participants presented a copy of the report to Euro-parliamentarian Guido Sacconi who chaired the E.U. Temporary Committee on Climate Change. Mr. Sacconi pledged to take account of the report in upcoming E.U. energy legislation. Moreover, euro-parliamentarians were to be informed of the project, which had to be disseminated throughout 2009. From a procedural standpoint, this can therefore be defined as a weak mini-public (Fraser, 1992; Fung, 2003), essentially intended to enlighten E.U. policymakers' judgment. The idea at the heart of the ETM was to reconcile different goals, often seen as incompatible in deliberative theory: allowing both a large number of participants (400 in this case), coming from a variety of horizons and backgrounds to participate, while ensuring a good quality deliberation (especially thanks to the small discussion tables and the presence of facilitators), while overcoming the scale problem thanks to the use of new technologies (video-conference and e-voting) and the aggregation of results (in the report). Technological and democratic innovations were to merge to allow deliberation not only at the regional but also at the European levels. Such a participatory apparatus allowed for a good quality deliberation – more face-to-face than on-line – but had little impact on Regions and EU public policies.

## **II. Deliberation in the Ideal-EU project: better face-to-face than on-line?**

Deliberation is not any type of discursive exchange in the public sphere. We opted here for a strict definition of deliberation, in order to distinguish it from other types of discursive modes. It is therefore understood as *a reasoned exchange of arguments aimed at taking a collective decision*. A deliberation is a collective discussion where certain assertions are voiced, namely arguments, i.e. assertions resting on reason rather than threat, power or money. Deliberation is therefore different from mere power relationships and bargaining (cf. Elster 1994, 1998). Then, this exchange of arguments is aimed at taking decisions. However, a decision is not necessarily aimed at becoming a public policy; it can be a consultative decision, a notice, affecting a group internally or externally. What matters is that discussion is not an end in itself (at odds with the debating societies or study circles studied by Kramer-Walsh, 2008); in this regard it is different from mere conversation<sup>11</sup>.

We are, however, interested not only in deliberation itself, but in its quality. In order to evaluate precisely the quality of deliberation, we decided to code systematically on-line and face-to-face discussions in the Ideal-EU project. While such an approach faces a number of shortcomings – the construction of categories always implying objectifying differences relying on a certain normative perspective made more or less explicit – it allows analysing rigorously the content of deliberation. While a large part of the

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<sup>11</sup>- We therefore disagree with Remer in considering conversations as a form of deliberation, as in that case deliberation is disconnected from decision. See G. Remer (2000) “Two Models of Deliberation: Oratory and Conversation in Ratifying the Constitution”, *The Journal of Political Philosophy*, 8 (1), p. 68-90.

empirical literature on deliberation focuses on the impact it can have on actors' preferences (Fishkin, 1997; Fishkin et al., 2002; Goodin, Niemeyer, 2003; Delli Carpini et al. 2004), it appears on the contrary necessary to study the process of deliberation in itself (Ryfe, 2005).

We therefore coded all discussions observed during the French e-town meeting, and a sample of 40 discussion topics on the French Ideal-EU on-line forum. Discussion themes of the e-town meeting as well as the selected discussions of the on-line forum are listed in Appentix 1. On-line discussion topics were selected randomly, in order to get a representative sample of the on-line forum discussions as a whole, as indicated in Table 2

**Table 2. Comparison of the analysed sample to the whole on-line forum discussions**

	<b>Sample</b>	<b>Total of the on-line forum</b>
<b>Nb of discussion topics</b>	40 (35%)	114
<b>Number of messages</b>	467 (37%)	1257
<b>Average message per topic</b>	10,45	9,8

We opted for the message or the oral intervention as a unit of analysis, not dividing them into sub-units. While the coding of on-line messages is an easy task – as they are all stored on the Ideal-EU website – the recording of face-to-face interventions during the e-town meeting was more complex, as we could not record or film the discussions<sup>12</sup>. Face-to-face discursive interactions were therefore noted manually, through direct observation at three discussion tables. Even though we tried to be as precise and accurate as possible in our note taking, we might have sometimes made some approximations or missed certain interventions, especially when several participants spoke at a time. It nevertheless appears that our corpus is reliable and reflects the way discussions have developed during the e-town meeting. Each intervention is therefore coded as a message.

This categorization is partly artificial, individualizing discussions that are necessarily collective, actors answering each other, interventions making sense in the sequence that preceded them. In this regard, quantitative analysis has been completed with qualitative data, excerpt of discursive sequences, offering a good picture of the dynamics of the discussion and of the collective aspect of deliberation.

### *1. Coding and evaluating the quality of deliberation*

Various authors have proposed coding schemes for measuring the quality of deliberation (Dahlberg, 2002; Trénel, 2004; Janssen, Kies, 2004; Steiner & al., 2004; Sromer-Galley 2007, Black, Burkhalter, Gastil, 2010), each trying to operationalize Habermas' model of ideal public sphere and the conditions of validity claims expression. For instance,

<sup>12</sup>- Ideal-EU project managers, and especially the consulting firm *Avventura Urbana*, did not allowed us to film or record the sessions, to avoid disturbing interactions and increasing participants' feeling of surveillance (they evoked the « big brother » syndrome). We nevertheless thank them to have permitted us to follow discussions directly at the tables.



Steenbergen et al. list the following criteria: participation, level of justification, content of justification, respect, and constructive politics (ideal role taking), when Dahlberg, being more exhaustive, holds 6 criteria : thematization and reasoned critique of problematic validity claims, reflexivity, ideal role taking, sincerity, inclusion and discursive equality and autonomy from state and economic power.

A rigorous evaluation of these criteria require various methodologies: as Janssen and Kies rightly describe in their study, to measure reflexivity, one needs both content analysis of argumentation and interviews or survey to have a better grasp of how people “critically examine their values, assumptions, and interests, as well as the larger social context” (Dahlberg 2002). Some criteria are therefore extremely difficult to operationalize: sincerity for instance is, most of the time, out of the reach of scientific coding. Relying on personal perception of actor’s sincerity can be biased by opinion’s antagonism or any other political or psychological factor such as domination factors. Nevertheless, we agree that some factors need to be read twice through content analysis and face to face interviews. Our results here present both aspects.

Here, we followed four criteria that appeared especially interesting for evaluating the quality of deliberation, largely following the grid described by Janssen and kies, although with minor differences. We selected :

- inclusiveness
- reciprocity
- level of justification and politicization of the arguments
- level of information and reliability of claims

### **Inclusion**

A first question we wanted to raise was the degree of inclusion of both face-to-face and on-line deliberation. The anonymity permitted by the internet, and more broadly the lower social pressure it favours, should allow a greater inclusion of on-line discussions in comparison to face-to-face, from two perspectives:

- Inclusion regarding the type of discourses that can be voiced: on-line discussions could allow other types of assertions than arguments to be expressed in the public sphere. Given the excluding potential of argumentation, on-line deliberation should foster the expression of anecdotes, personal stories and emotions.
- Inclusion regarding the content of discourses: on-line discussions could allow the expression of arguments that could not have been voiced in public.

In a word, publicity being weaker on the internet – opinions being expressed privately, even if they are nourished by what preceded them and become immediately public once posted – freedom of speech should be larger on-line, as have underlined certain research (Monnoyer-Smith, 2006; Monnoyer-Smith 2007; Witschge, 2008). This embodies a double stake for deliberation. Internet could first of all enlarge the realm of legitimate speech and therefore the potential participants – the higher inclusiveness of on-line formats should attract (or avoid excluding) actors generally remote from the public space. Discursive inclusion could therefore translate into a greater social inclusion. Then, this

higher inclusion could enrich deliberation, and in so doing foster better collective decisions.

The level of inclusion of Ideal-EU deliberation was here operationalised by evaluating:

- The frequency of expression of personal experiences, anecdotes and stories, i.e. of non-argumentative modes of expression.
- The range of arguments actually expressed in the discussion. One criteria from this perspective was the capacity of participants to express dissenting arguments. The question here was to what extent this deliberative format allowed the expression of a diversity of potentially conflicting arguments.

### **Reciprocity**

The second criterion aims at evaluating the level of interactivity of the debate, i.e. its level of dialogism. To what extent speakers actually answer each other in the Ideal-EU discussions? The level of responsiveness was measured by the nature of the answers given to the previously voiced arguments (expression of agreement, disagreement, or on the contrary change of subject or even breaking off of the discussion). This question is crucial as the expression of dissent, and more broadly the exposure to opposite opinions appear as essential criteria of the deliberative nature of an interaction (Sunstein 2006; Lev-On, Manin, 2006; Talpin 2007). In a word, there is no deliberation without disagreement. When all speakers agree, discussion becomes useless, or at best monological. The evaluation of the degree of responsiveness of the discussion should therefore help defining the nature of the discursive interactions observed: is it a true exchange of arguments or a set of monological arguments juxtaposed one after the other without any logical link?

### **Level of justification and politicization of the discussion**

The third criterion derives from the idea that deliberation supposes not only an exchange of arguments, but that these arguments are backed up and justified by reasons (rather than by threat, force or money). One of the dominant approaches on deliberation argues that publicity is the crucial factor for the emergence of deliberation. People cannot just say whatever comes to their minds in the public sphere. Following a Kantian tradition taken up by Habermas, a large fraction of deliberative theorists sees publicity as the crucial social mechanism orienting people towards the common good. In certain public contexts, some arguments would merely be inexpressible. The force of publicity is then attributed to the presuppositions of language by Habermas (1987), to the strategic will to convince actors with unstable preferences for Elster (1995), or to the submission to certain social norms for Fearon (1998).

We tried to evaluate these theoretical hypotheses by measuring the frequency of public good justifications, in contrast with self-interested one. Especially, as our case-study allowed for both on-line and face-to-face deliberation, it allows testing the power of publicity on actors justifications: to what extent the lower publicity constraints on the internet influences the justifications used by actors? Are self-interested justifications more frequent on-line than face-to-face?

We also tried here to evaluate a feature that is very often ruled out of deliberation analysis, namely its relationship to politics. The question of the politicization of the

discussions appears indeed essential given the power of the argument (at least in France) that deliberative democracy would foster a depoliticization of policy making. To what extent is it possible to talk about politics (Gamson, 1992; Eliasoph 1998; Duchesne, Haegel, 2006) in a deliberative forum<sup>13</sup> ? In the framework of the research we were especially interested to the references made to Europe and the European Union institutions, as this project was aimed to influence European policy-makers.

### **Level of information and reliability of claims**

Finally, what matters for deliberation is not only that arguments be oriented towards the common good, but also that they include some form of rationality. As deliberation is, among other goals, aimed at enlightening both participants and public policies, the fact-regarding nature of discourses (Offe, 1991) is also crucial for its quality. In a word, the cognitive or epistemic impact of deliberation requires it be informed (Estlund, 1997; Bohman, 2006). This epistemic goal is moreover not only shared by political theorists, but also by deliberative practitioners themselves, who see participation as a school of democracy. In the case of Ideal-EU as well, the organizers saw this experience as a way to enlighten participants

We evaluated the cognitive content of deliberation by both scrutinizing the external elements speakers used to back their arguments: do they use external sources (newspapers, books, tv shows, websites, etc.), other participants, figures of authority, or empirical data to back up their claims? In a word, do participants rely on other things than their discourse to convince others? Then, a second criterion was to evaluate the precision of the quoted sources. Is the reference precisely given to the audience (through a hypertext link for instance on the website), vaguely or merely mentioned without any precision? We therefore refused evaluating the reliability of the claims made by the participants – are they factually right or wrong? – to focus on the textual elements that give strength and reliability to the arguments made.

Before moving to the analysis of our empirical data, we would like to stress that we not only aimed at evaluating the quality of deliberation in general, but also of the respective virtues of on-line and face-to-face deliberation. Few non-experimental deliberative projects allow for both on-line and face-to-face participation, so well that the Ideal-EU project appeared as a perfect occasion for testing systematically the dynamics of on-line and face-to-face deliberation. In what follows, we therefore compare the two, but in order to understand the impact of the technical device (internet vs. physical presence) on deliberation, it also appeared necessary comparing these results with another factor, namely the framing of the discussion. We wondered indeed whether the crucial element influencing the dynamics of the discussion was the technical device or the way it was framed in the first place. We therefore divided our corpus along two types of framing, local and global ones, that appeared especially salient in the discussions. For the on-line forum, the frame of the discussion was derived from (1) the title of the discussion thread; and (2) the first message of the thread (that always appeared on the top of the page). For

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<sup>13</sup>- We opted for a strict definition of politicization. A message was coded as politicized as long as it included a reference to the organized field of politics: State, government, minister, political party, association, taxes, or to traditional political cleavages incitation/taxation; freedom/solidarity; sustainable development/profit, etc.

the e-town meeting, the frame was derived from the questions raised by the table facilitator, themselves coming from the organizers. The latter had indeed planned two general discussion sessions (“which energies for tomorrow's Europe?”, “How to decrease energy consumption?”), and a local session (“mobility in Poitou-Charentes”). Local frames referred therefore to individual practices and issues, while global frames referred to general problems.

**Table 3. Local and global frames in Ideal-EU discussions**

	Local framing	Global framing
On-line forum	74	393
E-town meeting	21	146

*2. An enlargement of legitimate modes of expression? The link between personal justification, discussions frames, and technical device*

To what extent discussions on the Ideal-EU website allowed an enlargement of legitimate modes of expression? Was it easier for participants to voice personal experiences, anecdotes and more broadly emotional discourses on-line or face-to-face? The stake, as rightly pointed out by deliberative critics (Benhabib, 1996; Young, 1997; Sanders, 1997; Mansbridge 1999; Polletta, 2005), is to compensate the potentially exclusive aspect of argumentation for the actors most deprived of cultural resources. While the disembodied and technical nature of on-line deliberation could prevent actors to voice personal stories, recent research has highlighted on the contrary that the more flexible pragmatic constraints framing on-line participation and the potentially unlimited space at actors' disposal in on-line forums, favoured the expression of storytelling (Black, 2009). What do we observe in the case of Ideal-EU?

It seems that the framing effect is the decisive factor when it comes to the enlargement of legitimate modes of expression in deliberations. We can go further than some previous results which attributed to the technical device the recourse to personal stories, when the framing of the topic under discussion might also have significantly influenced it (Monnoyer-Smith, 2005, 2006, 2007)<sup>14</sup>. Our analysis shows that 10.2% of interventions were justified by a personal experience during the e-town meeting, while 9.2% of the on-line forum messages<sup>15</sup>. The use of personal experience – both on-line and face-to-face – appears more frequent when discussions are framed locally (17.8 % of interventions), than globally (7.8 % of interventions). We therefore need to go further with a regression analysis to quantify the level of contribution of both factors (frame of discussion and on/off line discussion) to the form of justification.

<sup>14</sup>- As Scott Wright and John Street rightly underline: the topics under discussion may have influenced the deliberative quality of the debate » (2007, p. 864), the impact of the topics under discussion on deliberative interactions should therefore be taken into account.

<sup>15</sup> Assertions were coded as « personal experiences » when they were based on personal examples and anecdotes. This type of discourse is marked by the frequent use of modal markers such as « me », « myself », « I ».

We can nevertheless stress that on the whole, participants rarely backed up their arguments with personal experiences whatever the topic or the context of interaction: in this debate, global consideration on climate change was the focus rather than the individual environmental behaviour.

**Table 4. Use of personal experience and general justifications<sup>16</sup>**

	No justification	Personal experience	General justification
<b>On-line</b>	28	9,2	67,6
<b>Face-to-face</b>	49,1	10,2	45,5
<b>Local frame</b>	41.6	17,8	46.5
<b>Global frame</b>	39.6	7,8	57

From a more qualitative perspective, it was also striking to notice how, in the case of the e-town meeting, participants could switch their modes of expression according to the indications (and therefore the framing) of the moderator

**Excerpt 1. E-town meeting, Poitiers, 15.11.2008. Table 204.**

The table facilitator (TB) introduced the following theme of discussion: « What would you be ready to change in your daily habits ? »

Hervé: « Personnelly I'm all day long on my PC. I'm not ready to shut it down if i'm just leaving for an hour ? »

TB: « There is something for what you're absolutely not ready to reduce your consumption ? »

Sophie: « Hot water. For me it's impossible. Then, it's possible not to take baths, in my case it's been years ... »

Karim: « Heating. I could heat less. »

[...]

TB: « What are your daily habits ? »

Sophie: « I leave in La Rochelle. I need to walk 40 minutes to go to the market, it's far. » [...]

Time passing, the facilitator moved to the next question: « Do you consider our model of development is problematic ? »

Sophie: « I'm speaking too much, but ... At the economic level there are conflicts of interests between different actors. The keyword is profit, at the expense of the environnement. I feel we're going through a trap. »

Hervé: « We always want to make more, more, more. »

Karim: « For customers who want to use renewables, it's too expensive. While other energies are not taxed. For instance, whosale shops like Darty, there are always 50 computers on when you get in. So when there's something to sell ... »

Sophie: « Shops let them on for selling. They always prefer to sell. »

<sup>16</sup> Messages could contain different types of justifications (both general and personal) which explains why the sum exceeds 100 %.

Steeve: « They have no choice, it's business. Then, it's also consumption society. When you buy a TV set you want to see the quality of the image. But then it's contradictory. »

Hervé: « It's [sustainable development] contradictory. Development, it's personal, the environnement, it's collective. Economics is competition. »

Sophie: « But there are also alternative theories of development. We could grow slower. »

We thus see how similar participants can move, according to the framing of the facilitator's indications, from a very down-to-earth and personalized discussion, where they can voice examples and anecdotes related to their daily life, to a political discussion on « our model of development ». While such a study of the evolution of actors' discourses would be pointless on-line – it would only trivially suggest that a same user can express different types of arguments at different times, which is hardly surprising in a situation of asynchrony –, we showed that discussions focusing on transports and mobility at the regional level, because they were framed in reference to actors' daily practices of mobility, included more personal examples than others. In this regard, we can conclude that the enlargement of the legitimate modes of expression does not depend so much on the device – on-line or face-to-face – than on the framing of the discussion, certain modes of expression appearing more or more less legitimate according to the assertions that preceded them, especially when they are voiced by symbolically powerful actors, namely moderators. On-line discussions were not – in Ideal-Eu case – more inclusive than face-to-face discussions. But what about the content of arguments actors can express in both contexts ?

### *3. The power of a public grammar: Whatever the context, self-interested and partisan arguments cannot be voiced*

We showed elsewhere that (face-to-face) interactions in deliberative settings were ruled by a grammar of public life, making the public expression of both personal and partisan interests pragmatically difficult for actors, otherwise risking symbolic sanctions or depreciation of their reputation (Talpin 2006; 2007). The grammar of public life imposes on participants, if they want to be heard in the deliberation, to voice public interest arguments, without being explicitly political. It could therefore be hypothesised that, given the weakest publicity of on-line interactions, grammatical rules are more flexible on-line than face-to-face.

It can first of all be stressed that we hardly ever observed self-interested justifications in the case of the Ideal-EU project, both on-line and face-to-face. Even for debates most centred on actors' personal experience, self-interest was hardly ever opposed to environmental reason for instance. Some on-line participants – but similar arguments were heard face-to-face – stress nevertheless they are constrained to use polluting means of transportation, as this excerpt illustrates:

## Excerpt 2. On-line debate « Bouger sans polluer en Poitou-Charentes »

*Heji. 16.10.2008*

« I don't like bike (flat tire), have to drive, sorry, but I live pretty far from the high-school.<sup>17</sup> »

*BMX. 16.10.2008*

« I got a friend, same thing, he lives 60 km from highschool<sup>18</sup> »

*Chipendles17. 16.10.2008*

« Ok heji I think it's a false excuse, but ok, it's your choice even if i don't approve it really bye. Have a good one.<sup>19</sup> »

*Cléminou du Lisa. 21.10.2008*

« Bike is cool, but well, when you live in a remote town, do 20km to go downtown by bike, it's a bit hard.<sup>20</sup> »

While self-interested arguments are voiced - « I live pretty far from the high-school » - they are not framed as opposed to what is seen as the common good, i.e. fight against pollution. Both on-line and face-to-face, personal experiences were presented either as « good environmental practices », or as « vices to be corrected ». We did not observe actors defending their private comfort versus environmental reason. It appeared pragmatically impossible to express anti-environment arguments – both on-line and face-to-face – in the framework of the Ideal-EU project. This can be explained by the over-representation of pro-environment participants: 94.7 % of the e-town meeting participants defined themselves as « citizens interested by the environment », 13,7% were members of a green association, 12,3% of them were professionals or students in the field of the environment. This might have increased the cost of expression (in terms of reputation especially) of anti-environment arguments.

Another argument could be raised however, linked to the non-decisional and consultative nature of this experience (see section III. on this issue): considering that discussions would not have any impact on participants' daily life, they had no personal interests to defend. Risking losing face publicly in a pro-environment environment, participants had little interest in voicing arguments that, in the end, would not change their life. Defending one's interests in public is costly, and actors are only ready to do it when the latter are at stake, which was not the case with Ideal-EU.

Another type of arguments was merely inexpressible publicly: partisan ones. No political party was ever evoked during on-line and face-to-face discussions. Environmental associations and NGOs were hardly ever evoked either: only *Greenpeace* was quoted twice (both on-line), while other large organizations such as *Friends of the Earth*, or

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<sup>17</sup> - « j'aime pas le vélo (pneu creuvé )obligé de prendre voiture dsl mais j'habite assez loin du lycée. »

<sup>18</sup> - « g un copain c pareil il abite a 60 borne du licé »

<sup>19</sup> - « bon voila heji je trouve que c'est une fausse excuse mais bon c'est ton choix même si je ne l'approuve pas telement voila au revoir. Sur ce bonne continuation. »

<sup>20</sup> - « Le velo c'est sympla, mais bon quand on habite un patelin pommé, fait 20km pour aller en ville a vélo, c'est un peut dur. »

*France Nature Environnement*, never. Al Gore, Nicolas Sarkozy, José Bové were named once (all on the website), but national figures such as Nicolas Hulot (one of the strongest voice in the French public debate on the environment) or Segolène Royal (while president of the Poitou-Charentes Region) never. We can also stress that despite this project was aimed at producing recommendations to the European Parliament, this institution, as well as all other European institutions, were never evoked.

This absence of organized and partisan politics from both on-line and face-to-face discussions could come from the youth-oriented nature of this deliberative experience, few under-18 individuals being member of political parties in Western democracies. We have shown already however that politicized participants were over-represented in the case of Ideal-EU. Nevertheless, the latter almost hardly ever evoked partisan politics. None of them used the stage Ideal-EU embodied to promote the political positions of their party or association. It could therefore be concluded that discussions within the framework of the Ideal-EU project were depoliticized. This was not the case however. Politicization of the discussion was on the contrary frequent both on-line and face-to-face<sup>21</sup>. 28.4% of all interventions were indeed politicized. Politicization was however slightly more frequent face-to-face (32.9% of the interventions) than on-line (26.3%). It can be stressed that politicization of the discussion was almost two times more frequent when discussions were framed as global (30.6 %), than when they were local (16.8%) discussions.

**Table 5. Frequency of the politicization of the discussions (in %)**

	<b>Politicized interventions</b>	<b>Unpoliticized interventions</b>
On-line forum	26,3	73,7
E-town meeting	32,9	67,1
Local frame	16,8	83,2
Global frame	30,6	69,4

Overall, the frequency of politicization of these discussions was a surprise, given the youth of the participating public. References to « the State », « sustainable development », « capitalism », « taxes », were common : the word « State » was used 16 times during the town-meeting and 18 times in the on-line discussions analysed. An example of the type of politicized discussion that could take place in this framework can be offered quoting an excerpt from the on-line forum:

<sup>21</sup>- We opted for a strict definition of politicization. A message was coded as politicized as long as it included a reference to the organized field of politics: State, government, minister, political party, association, taxes, or to traditional political clivages incitation/taxation; freedom/solidarity; sustainable development/profit, etc.



**Excerpt 3. On-line debate « Société de consommation: risques et conséquences »**

*Rirom* – 06.10.2008: How can we define the true human need, the genuine and not factice need ? Being ready to answer this question open the door to paternalism and authority. No government can pretend knowing what its citizens have to buy without being qualified a dictatorship. » [...]

*Pauline* – 08.10.2008: Beware of not falling into total evilisation of the system. Of course we are in a consumption system were excesses are plenty. But there has been a few improvements and we won't be able to change all the habits of a generation. » [...]

*Defrain* – 08.10.2008: « Without being overly pessimistic, it is necessary to collectively take a starting point. Profit cannot rule everything. Human conscience needs to change. A new metaphysic shall rise. »

While evoking partisan politics was impossible in this context – both on-line and face-to-face – a non-partisan politicization of the discussions was nevertheless possible. Deliberative forums are not fit for ordinary political struggle, which does not mean they imply a total depoliticization of the debates. Issues can be politicized, generalized and globalized, as long as this politicization remains untied to special (partisan or organizational) interests.

*4. Little disagreement, but more on-line than face-to-face*

On-line discussions neither allow for opening up the modes of expression in public nor the types of arguments expressed – results presented so far highlight the role of the framing of the discussions rather than of the medium of communication – one could question the capacity of on-line discussions to foster the expression of disagreement. While often face-to-face group pressure silences dissent (Mansbrige, 1980; Eliasoph, 1998; Conover et al. 2002; Duchesne, Haegel, 2006), on-line discussions should be able favouring the expression of disagreement.

The first observation of our results indicates the slightness of the differences between on-line and face-to-face when it come to the expression of disagreement, 12,3 % of the messages disagreeing with previous ones on the forum, against 12,6 % face-to-face<sup>22</sup>. Again, in this case, the framing of the discussion appears more important in terms of disagreement, as it appears much more frequent during global (14,1% of the interventions) than local (4%) discussions. These results need however to be nuanced, as the sum of disagreements and « expression of agreements and disagreements » changes the picture. As a matter of fact, expressions of both agreement and disagreements most of time meant disagreement, presented in a gentle and diplomatic manner: « I agree, but

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<sup>22</sup> For coding, the disagreement category was understood in a strict sense as the explicit expression of disagreement, through the use of terms such as « I don't agree », « No, but », « however », « nevertheless », etc.

... », the rest of the message arguing against the previous message. When these two categories are summed, the on-line forum appear as the place where disagreement was expressed more often (24,1% of messages expressed a disagreement on-line, against 16,8 % face-to-face). This reflects both the higher length of on-line messages (where both for and against arguments could be voiced) and above all their greater sophistication, as they included recognition of previous participants and disagreeing or qualifying points.

**Table 6. Frequency of expression of agreement and disagreement**

	<b>Agreement</b>	<b>Disagreement</b>	<b>Neither</b>	<b>Both</b>	<b>Breaking off</b>
On-line forum	16,4	12,3	54	11,8	5,5
E-town meeting	13,8	12,6	61,1	4,2	8,4
Local framing	17,8	4	66,3	4	7,9
Global framing	13,6	14,1	58,1	7,5	6,7

The norm of on-line deliberation, just like face-to-face deliberation, appears nevertheless to be consensus more than disagreement, as in the end more than 75% of all interventions on-line, and more than 82% of face-to-face ones did not express any disagreement with previous locutors. While the explicit expression of agreement was rare – we will come back to it below – the rule was to keep on discussing (it was not a « breaking off ») without explicitly expressing neither agreement nor disagreement (the « neither » category).

While the avoidance of conflict and opposite views as been clearly demonstrated for face-to-face interactions (Eliasoph, 1998; Conover et al. 2002), how can the scarcity of disagreement on-line be explained? While some feared that on-line discussions become wild or radical spaces open up to all sorts of flaming and polarization (Sunstein, 2001), it seems that this did not happen in the case of Ideal-EU. Different explanations can be evoked.

First of all, on-line discussions, when they have only an expressive goal, might only attract zealots and convinced participants. As on-line participation was based in this case on self-selection – as in most of the on-line forums – it is possible that only pro-environment individuals have participants. It has been clearly shown elsewhere that the internet is a fragmented space, allowing for the coordination of epistemic communities rather for contradictory discussions (Wyatt, Katz & Kim, 2000; Lev-on, Manin, 2006; Flichy, 2008). From this perspective, as our data indicate the over-representation of pro-environment participants, the ideal-EU website might have been perceived as pro-environment, and therefore fled by potential opponents.

Another hypothesis is that the expression of dissent and of anti-environment arguments might have been censored by the webmaster. He indeed acknowledged he removed some messages “from young people who did not really wanted to contribute to the debate, but rather have fun on the forum, posting useless or pointless messages [...] comments such

as “we don't care about the environment”, “nobody will ever listen to you”, etc.<sup>23</sup>” Some of the coordinators of the project also acknowledge he might have been overly interventionist in the debate: “I think he was overly involved in the forum [...] I told him to let it go at some point. He almost had a role of participant rather than of moderator.<sup>24</sup>” This interventionist role might have had a significant framing effect, when one knows the French website moderator defines himself as a green activist, member of different environmental associations.

More broadly, as we stressed already, it seems that discussions have been framed in a pro-environment way by the participants who created new discussion threads. Debates are named “for new wind-turbines”, “moving without polluting in Poitou-Charentes”, the thread on consumption society starts with the following sentence: “Nowadays, consumption society is not based on usefulness and reason, but on uselessness and irrationality.<sup>25</sup>” If the impact of framing effects is weaker on-line than face-to-face, it might have nevertheless make some potential opponents flee.

### *5. More constructive and informed discussions on-line*

Far from favouring the expression of disagreement, on-line discussions appear on the contrary to foster the expression of mutual agreement<sup>26</sup>. A bit more than face-to-face – 16.4% of messages, against 13.8 – on-line discussions allow participants expressing their approval of the previously exposed arguments, and stressing the merit of certain contributors, as indicate the following messages coming from the forum:

« I totally agree, it's crazy to see how expensive bio products are !! »<sup>27</sup>

« I totally agree with gugus 447 and banqueru, »<sup>28</sup>

« On the other hand I agree with you, the Savonius type could be used (because cheap, you can find some at less than 800€) for individual houses or small towns. »<sup>29</sup>

The over-representation of expression of both agreement and disagreement on-line – indicating participants take into account previous participants' points, even if we stressed that it often leans towards disagreeing statements – reinforces the constructive aspect of on-line discussions. From this perspective, discussions would appear more constructive on-line than face-to-face, interlocutors repeating arguments previously expressed, stressing the contributions of each other in a more respectful manner than face-to-face,

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<sup>23</sup>- Interview with the Website moderator, Poitiers, 6.12.2008.

<sup>24</sup>- Interview with the French Ideal-Eu project manager, Poitiers, 05.02.2009

<sup>25</sup>- <http://www.ideal-debate.eu/fr/node/262>

<sup>26</sup> Just like for the expression of disagreement, the agreement category was understood in a strict sense as the explicit expression of assent, through the use of terms such as « I agree », « as you rightly said », « indeed », « it is true that », ‘in keeping with », etc.

<sup>27</sup>- « je suis complètement d'accord c'est vraiment ciderant de voir a kel point les produits bio sont cher!! »

<sup>28</sup>- « moi je suis totalement d'accord avec gugus 447 et banqueru, »

<sup>29</sup>- « Par contre je suis d'accord avec toi, le type Savonius, pourrait être plus utilisé (car peut chère, on en trouve à moins de 800€) par les maisons individuelles ou les petites collectivités. »

where verbal battle can always arise. When physically co-present, participants hardly ever highlight the contributions of the other interlocutors, to avoid losing face.<sup>30</sup> Indicating publicly and face-to-face the contribution of another participant might indeed always result in belittling one's own performance. The euphemisation of social interactions allowed by the internet would therefore foster the development of more constructive discussions in the public sphere. This conclusion should nevertheless be nuanced as it relies on a specific context – even if it is the norm of most deliberative experiences – where discussions take place among actors sharing if not opinions at least common values, that can be qualified as environmentalist.

Another interesting result is that discussions did not appear more monological on-line than face-to-face. On the contrary, as we already stressed, on-line discussions allowed for an easier expression of both agreement and disagreement, and conducted to less breaking off the discussion (participants changing subject completely with previous speakers), than face-to-face (5.5 % vs. 8.4%). The constructive nature of on-line discussions is also evidenced from another data: the frequency of references to other participants to back up an argument (see Table 7 below). 19.5% of on-line messages referred to other participants, against only 4.2% of face-to-face interventions. This partly contradicts the result of some previous research that stressed the monologic aspect of on-line discussions in comparison to face-to-face ones (Wilhem, 2000; Dumoulin, 2002) and especially when they imply writing rather than speaking (through web cams for instance, see Stromer-Galley, 2007).

Last but not least, on-line deliberation appears in our research to have been more informed than face-to-face one, whatever the framing of the discussion. 53.6 % of on-line messages relied on an external source (data, examples, other participants, laws, newspaper articles and websites), against 29.3% of face-to-face interventions. Not only were on-line messages better referenced, but also more precise, as 21.4% of on-line sources were somehow indicated (in the better but less frequent case through a hypertext link), against 8.4 % of face-to-face interventions.

Despite the use of the discussion guide during the e-town meeting – that was used very little in the observed interactions – deliberation was more informed, arguments being better backed-up and more precise, on-line than face-to-face.

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<sup>30</sup> - Laurence Monnoyer-Smith stresses for instance that in the case of the Public Debate on the construction of a 3<sup>rd</sup> airport in Paris (DUCSAI), on-line speeches were more polished, and less emotional or even aggressive, than face-to-face ones (Monnoyer-Smith, 2007).

**Table 7. External references and precision of the sources evoked in the discussion**

	<b>On-line forum</b>	<b>E-town meeting</b>	<b>Local Framing</b>	<b>Global Framing</b>
<b>No back-up</b>	46.4	70.7	59.4	59,5
<b>Back up</b>	53.6	29,3	40.6	60,5
<b>Factual elements</b>	33.3	3,6	27,7	26,8
<b>Authorities</b>	6,1	4,2	3	4,8
<b>Other participant</b>	19,5	3,6	11,9	10,7
<b>External sources</b>	10,1	3,6	5	7,1
<b>Not precise</b>	78.6	91,6	85,1	85,3
<b>Vague quotation</b>	14,2	7,8	9,9	10,4
<b>Precise sourcing</b>	7,2	0,6	5	4,3

#### *6. A good deliberation ... at the national (and not European) level*

Overall the picture presented here indicates that the deliberative quality was high both on-line and face-to-face. Discussions were inclusive, oriented towards the common good, informed and responsive. The results should however be compared more systematically to other deliberative experiences in order to evaluate more precisely the relative deliberative quality of Ideal-EU deliberation. We also stressed that the framing of the discussion appeared more important than its technical context (on-line and face-to-face) for the dynamics of the discussion. The different formats of the discussion appear partly contradictory from this perspective. While local framing fosters the enlargement of discursive modes beyond argumentation – and especially the expression of personal stories and emotional discourses – they also tend to depoliticize the discussion. While on-line discussions foster constructive and informed deliberation, it does not necessarily enlarge the range of possible arguments, and largely fail to appear more inclusive discursively than face-to-face discussion. One of the conclusions could therefore be that these different format – on-line and face-to-face, local and global framings – should indeed be associated and articulated during deliberation, as did the Ideal-EU project, in order to fulfil the entire potential of deliberative democracy.

One of the failures of this project was, however, its incapacity to organize a deliberation at the European level. Deliberations of good quality took place, but among national citizens. On-line participants discussed in their language among their fellow citizens. Face-to-face, the national discussions were intermingled with a few discussions through

video-conference between the three countries animators of the town-meetings, and a synchronous translation was provided, indicating the European nature of the experience. But participants of the three countries did not talk, and even less argue, among each other. The only “European” or supra-national component in the Ideal-Eu experiment was the voting system. The same polling questions were asked to all three regions' participants, and their answers were aggregated in the final document, transmitted to the European parliament. This leads to the question of the (limited) impact of thus experiment, on both public policies, and more broadly on the European public sphere.

### **III. Deliberating for nothing? The limited impact of the Ideal-EU project at both regional and European levels**

Although “the added value to democracy of participatory devices...cannot only be measured in terms of its bearing upon decision-making,” as Rémi Lefebvre (2007: 53) rightfully notes, decision-making power is crucial to participants, whose civic commitment is largely dependent on the will of the authorities to make their voice count. While, as shown above, Ideal-EU allowed for a good quality deliberation, both on-line and face-to-face, it failed to have any impact on regional and European public policies. Hence the question: does (the quality of) deliberation matters, if it has no external impact in the end?

#### *1. Elected Officials Commitment: A Transparent “Cherry-picking”*

Ideal-EU was originally designed as a merely consultative tool. Discussions were intended to generate opinions and recommendations that would “enlighten” the decision-making of elected officials. Indeed, these officials gave numerous repeated assurances that they would take account of the report, e.g. Regional Councilor Georges Stupar’s (Les Verts) statement as he closed the ETM on November 15<sup>th</sup>:

“Your suggestions will indeed be taken into account, not just by the European Union, but by our Regional Council. I invite you to check our website to see how and when your suggestions are taken into account.”

While suitably vague, the statement did assure participants they had not wasted their time. Several days earlier, Mr. Stupar told the media:

“To anybody who thinks this is an umpteenth debate with nothing new to say about climate change, Georges Stupar vigorously denies that. This is not hot air! The members of the European committee on climate change have made a commitment to take account of the student’s opinions.”<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>31</sup>- Centre Presse, Nov. 15, 2008, p. 9. See also *Courrier de l’Ouest*, Nov. 17, 2008.

Likewise, MEP Sacconi (PSE, Italy) thanked the tri-regional delegation of participants for his copy of the ETM report by stating:

“To respond immediately to your expectations, know that I shall circulate your final report to all Euro-parliamentarians, with of course, special emphasis on members of the Temporary Committee on Climate Change. We shall review your proposals carefully. In addition, we shall send copies to other partner Regions, so that they can pass on to you a summary of the all the climate change laws that will highlight your input and the provisions that incorporate your proposals.”<sup>32</sup>

While MEP Sacconi humbly undertook to *read* the proposals of the report and circulate information to regions on the E.U. law package on climate change, it is not clear how the Ideal-EU participants' proposals could have been used. More noticeably however, the E.U. climate legislation adopted in December 2008 shows no trace of Ideal-EU participants “input”. At the time of writing, Ideal-EU participants are still asking about the document “that will highlight your input and the provisions (of new laws) that incorporate your proposals.” This is all the more striking as a vast majority of participants emphasize the importance of the impact of such experiences on public policies.

## *2. Importance of the external impact for participants*

While 93% of participants report learning “something” about climate change as a result of the ETM, with another 60% saying they learned how to articulate their views, the interest in political debate generated by the event appears insufficient to most participants if deliberation is seen to exert no effect on the decision-making. It should be stressed however that only 43% of the ETM participants declared having participated to « influence decisions », while « interest in environmental issues » (77%) or the opportunity to « learn and get informed » (53%), appeared as more direct motivations to engage.

Nevertheless, closeness with political leaders seem to increase the importance of direct impact of participation, as indicate the words of the delegates who met Guido Sacconi in the Strasbourg meeting:

“As a participating youth, and in the name of everyone I know who took part in Ideal-EU on November 15<sup>th</sup> – and even everybody I didn’t meet too, I think – I would like to see how the proposals we made and put into this final report will become a reality. I’d like to see how they become incorporated into the legislation pending with the European Parliament and if we actually made any real contribution to change.”<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>32</sup>- Minutes of the presentation of the ETM report to the Temporary Committee on Climate Change, Strasbourg, November 18, 2008.

<sup>33</sup>- Minutes of the meeting with Mr. Sacconi on Nov. 18, 2009 to present a copy of the ETM Final Report.

Likewise, one of the Tuscan delegates reflected general opinion when she remarked:

”My expectations about positive, visible results from the suggestions we have made to the Euro-parliamentarians...My expectations about what happens next are the same as that of the other participants: we want to see our proposals in future draft legislation and, more importantly, in policy measures over the years to come.”<sup>34</sup>

The above quotes show that the key concern of participants is demonstrable impact of their input on public policy. However, participants’ expectations clash with the representative logics of European and Regional authorities, which make extremely difficult, not to say impossible, the incorporation of ETM proposals and opinions.

### *3. A limited impact on public policies*

Despite the unanimous choir of agreement on the importance of participation's impact, Ideal-EU did not affect public policy-making, either regional or European. Mr. Sacconi acknowledges it implicitly, at odds with what the speech he gave to Ideal-EU participants:

“So, it was quite an experience, right? But, um, uh ... [embarrassed] about impact, I’m not sure if anybody has thought about follow-up. It was sort of, let’s say, a special experiment ... Of course, expressing an opinion about policy choices, E.U. directives and regulations (is always complicated). [...] Personally, I think it’s the decision-makers – elected representatives – they’re the ones who should decide. *It’s up to them to make the final call.* It’s their job to make the final summary (of your input).”<sup>35</sup>

Asked later on whether the ETM Final Report had any real or marginal effect on his final summary, Mr. Sacconi added:

“Yes, I think it had a slight effect, in the way we underscored the importance of local action and of the inclusion of the citizenry. In that way, yes. But on specific policy choices, um, uh... [embarrassed] The fight against climate change is complex issue.”<sup>36</sup>

Mr. Sacconi’s words portray Ideal-EU as an example of Robert Futrell’s (2002:61) “performative governance” that describes the proceedings of a US “city commission” characterized by “interactional performances” that give “an impression of critical debate” and are receptive to input from the general public, but only up to a point – and with

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<sup>34</sup> - *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> - Emphasis added.

<sup>36</sup> - Interview with Mr. Guido Sacconi, Brussels, March 3, 2009.



limited impact on policy-making outcomes.

It could be easy to file away the ETM alongside other deliberative mechanisms set up by governments to rally grassroots support from a variety of populations, as they deplore apathy in the general public.<sup>37</sup> However, beyond the “strategic” perspective or the standard hypothesis about the reluctance of elected officials to share power, it appears that the very format of the Ideal-EU Final Report, the ETM debating framework and the minimalist participation of political actors made almost impossible to translate Ideal-EU proposals into European or Regional public policies.

#### *4. Deliberation and Decision: Screening proposals and emphasizing opinions*

Unlike devices specifically intended to elicit position statements about public policy, e.g. the 2007 ADEME debate on energy consumption (Benvegna & Brugidou, 2008), the ETM produced a report, handed to elected officials, that contained no specific proposals but a summary of an enlightened public opinion (thanks to deliberation) on climate change.

One of the reasons of the limited impact of the Ideal-EU project is therefore the screening process proposals had to go through the final report. Any ETM proposal had to survive four distinct screenings : (1) voiced proposals had to be noted on the computers at each table – which was not the case for all the them; (2) then, the « theme teams » embodied a triple screen, as the minutes from all 17 tables passed instantly to the two Frenchmen on the 10-person theme team in Tuscany for summarization, where minutes from the other two ETMs were likewise processed, along with a global summary for all three meetings drafted by the general coordinator. The result was fed back to all three ETMs on megascreen displays, as shown here:

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<sup>37</sup>- As elsewhere, it is rare in France for deliberative mechanisms to come with any stipulations of direct, explicit linkage to policymaking. Thus, urban planning and partnership involve no commitment to power-sharing with community residents; Local referendums are sooner public information campaigns that form part of the policymaking process but remain isolated therefrom; Public enquiries almost invariably result in approval of urban renewal projects put forward by local decision-makers; neighborhood councils can only make consultative proposals. Only participatory budgets – with less than 10 cases in France, one of the more ambitious being precisely in the Poitou-Charentes Region (Sintomer, Röcke, Talpin, 2009) – appear as empowered participatory governance institutions.

## Common issue: Climate change and energy in Europe

### Session I

Which energies for tomorrow's Europe?



#### What measures would be effective in reducing CO<sub>2</sub> emissions?

- Let's start by respecting the Kyoto protocol
- We need to change our life style:
  - use the bicycle, also as a system of public transportation;
  - increase the use of public transportation system: with a good service offered at an affordable price;
  - reduce the use of cars, but be aware that car remains often indispensable in the countryside: by car sharing (with discount in highways), by putting toll roads in the city, by increasing the price of parking spaces;
  - to use efficient lamps, to buy products without packaging, to consume local products, to reduce air conditioning;
  - to promote recycling, by fining the ones who don't do it or by rewarding the ones who do it.
- To educate and make people aware of this problem from early school days: the existing information about the necessity of reducing CO<sub>2</sub> emissions is too sophisticated and scientific, there should be a easiest and more direct information.
- We need incentives for renewable energies, to develop them as a substitute to oil: wind energy, solar energy, water power, geothermic power and so on. We also need to increase the funds allocated to research on renewable energy
- To make the new technologies (renewable energy, low energy appliances) more accessible to the general public, notably by reducing their cost.
- Nuclear energy may be dangerous and is based on fossil material and so is not a solution.
- We could stock CO<sub>2</sub>. Stocking CO<sub>2</sub> is useless
- Let's absorb CO<sub>2</sub>, for example reforestation

#### Other comments

- It is too difficult to give up oil.
- We need manipulation of information to change our life style
- People are required to act carefully while in the meantime industries and governments do not seem to be making a big effort in this sense ("let's start from public spaces: in the toilets here all the lights are switched on! let's switch them off!!")
- We cannot do anything alone, if we don't have the politicians support.
- Fossil energy can not be replaced by renewable energy.
- Some renewable energy like bio-fuels can be quite polluting too.
- The best to do is that each one of us use only the energy he can generate

The multi-step screening distilled hundreds of comments into a handful of bulleted statements. In question here is not the legitimacy of screening in itself, which seems incompressible, but its management. The raw commentary doubtless needed processing. However, screening needed greater thoughtfulness and transparency. As a result, one serious limitation of the Ideal-EU project was not a failure to generate new ideas but the failure to harvest them, because of loss during the screening process. Indeed, one organizer who examined the Final Report but attended no ETM discussions, remarked: "The plan was to generate new ideas. It didn't happen."

The Final Report handed to Guido Sacconi on November 18<sup>th</sup> did not optimized – given its presentation –the incorporation of Ideal-EU participants' proposals by E.U. lawmakers. It contains two type of information: the synthesis of the discussions made by the theme team and the results of the poll. Discussion synthesis was split between the theme team summaries of the shared opinions and "outliers" remarks qualified as "Other". In practice, the comments were formulated in terms so general as to be useless for public policymaking purposes. For example, "How can we reduce CO<sub>2</sub> emissions?" was a sub-theme that lent itself – given its framing – to the formulation of public policies proposals, but the Final Report simply notes "use bicycles," "expand public transport" and "reabsorb CO<sub>2</sub> through reforestation." What is left are sooner laudable battle cries than actionable ideas that can be written into law. Any concrete proposals that did figure

in the Final Report were measures already in effect in certain cities, e.g. down town tolls and punitive parking fees.

Furthermore, recourse to multiple-choice questions and polling (which were the other way participants' opinions were represented in the Final Report) hardly encouraged participants to formulate original policy ideas, e.g.:

- Why are renewable energies insufficiently exploited?
- Has your attitude to climate change changed since the start of the financial crisis?
- What is your opinion of our model for economic growth?
- Which daily habits are you willing to change?
- What do you think is the main drawback of TER (Regional Train) medium-distance express trains?

Broad-brush questions inhibit formulation of specific concrete ideas. Keypad polls of this nature reduce the process to an opinion survey rather than a mechanism for constructing proposals capable of influencing European or regional legislators. As a matter of fact, during our interview, Mr. Sacconi compared Ideal-EU directly to a Eurobarometer opinion poll.

If the organizers saw Ideal-EU as a tool of useful insight into how youth perceive climate change, few elected officials became directly involved in the experiment. From this perspective, the role of “participation experts” (Nonjon, 2005) in shaping the form and conditions of participation has to be underlined. From the outset, the Ideal-EU project was operated by the mission head for participatory democracy of Poitou-Charentes Regional Government and its departments; elected officials simply followed progress and performed official registrations. The ETM was administration head’s idea. It was then approved by regional president’s special advisor and then by the regional president, Ms. Ségolène Royal, and registered by her elected officials. None took any real direct interest in the project. Having other commitments at the time, Ms. Royal was unable to emulate Tuscany Regional President Claudio Martini, who followed progress in organizing the Ideal-EU project. Finally, the ETM coincided with the national convention of the Socialist Party and the French ETM was inaugurated by Mr. Georges Stupar, a less influential official, which lowered the media and public profile of the event.<sup>38</sup>

As a consequence, despite the original and feasible proposals generated through Ideal-EU, the absence of solid political backing undercut its potential impact on public policy. Transparent selective listening is only operative if elected officials commit to giving due consideration of the resulting proposals. Despite his declarations, it is unclear whether Mr. Stupar wields enough influence on the regional council for it to adopt any of the ETM proposals. As the mission head for participatory democracy remarked: “Ideally, I wanted to see Ségolène Royal stand up at the end of the day and say ‘this, we can’t do’, ‘that, maybe’ and ‘this is great, we’ll do it’. Ideally. But as it stands, Stupar hasn’t the powers to do that.”

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<sup>38</sup>- All three regions had approved November 15 for the ETMs but the French Socialist Party rescheduled its national convention to the same date. Ms. Royal – who was candidate to become the new Socialist Party First Secretary – could not miss the conference and it was too late to postpone the Ideal-EU project.

## **Conclusion: Diffusion of democratic innovations, towards a deliberative model of European governance?**

The lack of impact of the Ideal-EU project on public policies raises questions about the actual reasons behind setting-up such device. It appears from this perspective that each actor had his or her own objectives. For the e-Participation Delegation of the European Commission that sponsored the event, the prime objective was to test new tools of e-participation. As Mr. Sacconi noted: “It was a dress rehearsal, an experiment, to see how this device worked, even just from a technological standpoint.” For Euro-parliamentarians, it was more likely about sampling informed citizens about their opinions on a major political issue. Given the pro-environmental slant of opinion harvested at the ETM, such devices can help ecologically-minded actors mobilize informed public opinion against a variety of lobbies and other interest groups.

For Ideal-EU organizers, it was about testing a new tool of democracy. Ideal-EU could expand future citizens’ participation in regional affairs, as noticed by the mission head for participatory democracy: “The deliberative power of this device opens up new options we hadn’t thought of with more standard devices.” It has since then replicated partly the town meeting device, at a regional level, to reform its participatory budgeting institutions. The study of Ideal-EU shows therefore that despite limited short-term impact on public policies, democratic innovations might infuse an administration and transform, partly, the structure of governance. What is true at the regional level could also be true at the European one. While Ideal-EU failed to create a European deliberation, its procedural device could allow for such developments. As a matter of fact, the European Citizens Consultations follow a similar procedural organization – inspired by America Speaks 21<sup>st</sup> century Town Meeting – and partly managed to create a European deliberation.<sup>39</sup> One can indeed easily imagine a random selection of a diverse sample of European citizens discussing, with the help of translators (like in the European parliament), on European affairs.

A final point should be made, however, on the civic risks of such democratic experientialism. Even if such projects can be seen by policy-makers as experiences, they are hardly lived as such by participants, all the more as politicians keep on repeating their voice will have an impact. One of the consequences of the Ideal-EU project was for instance an increased cynicism from participants, as the words of this participant illustrate: “I mean, if it has no impact, it’s useless. Like it was a cool day but well, me, I can’t help thinking and wondering about the impact. I mean, me, I’ve been disappointed

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<sup>39</sup>- <http://www.european-citizens-consultations.eu/> . ECCs enabled about 100 citizens from all 27 E.U. members to exchange views on E.U. public policy and submit suggestions to Euro-parliamentarians in June. First tested in 2007, they were again operated from January to June 2009 on the theme of “The social and economic future of the E.U.”. The device consisted of online debates managed by Toute l’Europe and a face-to-face citizens’ assembly held by CIDEM in France on March 21 & 22. Subsequently, 150 persons representing 27 national ECCs attended the European Citizens’ Summit held in Brussels on May 10 & 11; their mission was to finalize a list of recommendations and debate them with E.U. policymakers. The 15 recommendations involved are at <http://www.european-citizens-consultations.eu/files/Synthesis%20Recommendations%20grouped%20final.pdf>.

a lot. A little too much. I think it's because I don't believe in it much anymore."<sup>40</sup> Elsewhere, another ETM ex-participant noted: "A lot of things got said that were really beautiful and I think that, because nothing happened about it, I think that's, um... It's going to put off some people because they were really expecting a lot from that day... But because nothing happens in the end, I wouldn't be surprised because I know the political system isn't always something you can trust."<sup>41</sup>

The disappointment and cynicism from this sort of experience readily transmutes into civic disengagement. Here follows another ETM participant's reaction when asked if participation was any incentive to play a greater role in politics: "Me? Yeah, I'll do another one, but if they say it's gonna be like Ideal-EU, you can be sure I'm not going. No way. Ideal-EU??? Maybe I'm being too hard, but it was near useless."<sup>42</sup> While experiencing with new forms of democratic governance is fascinating, and urgent given the ever growing gap between EU institutions and politicians and their constituents, citizens hardly ever participate for for the sake of it. From this perspective, it is only when they are empowered that deliberative innovations can have a positive impact on the citizenry.

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<sup>40</sup>- Group interview in Niort, February 5, 2009.

<sup>41</sup>- Anonymous participant's remark in Châtellerault, February 9, 2009.

<sup>42</sup>- Group interview in Niort, February 5, 2009.

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**Appendix 1 A.**  
**List of discussion topics selected for the analysis of on-line  
deliberation on the French Ideal-EU Website**

<b>N°</b>	<b>Discussion thread title</b>	<b>Number of messages</b>	<b>Framing</b>
1	Pour de nouvelles éoliennes	83	Global
2	Société de consommation : risque et conséquences	66	Global
3	La fin du pétrole	50	Global
4	Bouger sans polluer en Poitou-Charentes	35	Local
5	Les déchets : réduction, réutilisation, recyclage ou tout à la fois ?	31	Global
6	Les intérêts de la planète sont-ils passés avant ceux des hommes ?	25	Global
7	la campagne Display pour les lycées, vous connaissez ?	19	Local
8	Quelles énergies pour le monde (et l'Europe) de demain?	18	Global
9	Produits d'entretien corrosifs dans les lycées	10	Local
10	Déforestation en Amazonie	9	Global

11	Les minorités et les ethnies indigènes, victimes silencieuses	9	Global
12	Et le Grenelle de l'environnement ?	8	Global
13	Le bioplastique: avenir ou fausse bonne idée ?	8	Global
14	New lycée hôtelier de Kyoto	7	Local
15	L'accélérateur de particules géant	6	Global
16	Le CO2	6	Global
17	Recyclage des composants informatiques très polluants	6	Local
18	Philo	5	Global
19	Locavores	5	
20	Le rôle de la culture?	5	Global
21	Le pétrole ... et le fric que ça englobe pour le gouvernement	4	Global
22	Le recyclage des végétaux	4	Global
23	Changer les choses	4	Global
24	La vente de fourrure des animaux	4	Global
25	La nourriture bio, bonne ou mauvaise	3	Global
26	Cité autonome: Flintenbreite	3	Local

	(Lubeck)		
27	Réchauffement climatique	3	Global
28	Décroissance	2	Global
29	Meubles en aggloméré ou en contreplaqué	2	Global
30	Les maisons écocitoyennes pourquoi n'y en a-t-il pas plus ?	2	Global
31	Camions et poids lourds	2	Global
32	Utilité des réserves d'eau pour l'irrigation et l'alimentation en eau potable en cas d'urgence	2	Global
33	Les conséquences du pétrole	2	Global
34	Pourquoi est-il nécessaire de mettre en place le co-voiturage, aujourd'hui ?	2	Global
35	Les produits fossile	2	Global
36	Le gulf stream	2	Global
37	Régénération des friches de grandes agglomérations par des « quartiers durables »	1	Global
38	éco-guerriers	1	Global
39	Initiative report-terre	1	Global

40	Crise, krack, guerre global	1	Global
Total	40	467	

**Apprentix 1B.**  
**Themes of discussion during the e-town meeting in Poitiers**

**Thème 1: Quelles énergies pour l'Europe de demain?**

- Sous-thème 1: « Quel est d'après vous l'argument principal pour réduire l'utilisation des énergies fossiles? »
- Sous-thème 2: « pourquoi les énergies renouvelables ne sont-elles pas plus développées? »
- Sous-thème 3 « Quel serait le moyen le plus efficace de réduire le CO2? »

**Thème 2: Comment réduire notre consommation d'énergie?**

- Sous-thème 1: « Quelle est la priorité pour réduire notre consommation d'énergie? »
- Sous-thème 2: « qu'est-ce que vous seriez prêt à changer dans votre comportement quotidien? »
- Sous-thème 3: « Le modèle de développement est-il problématique? »

**Thème 3: La mobilité en Poitou-Charentes**

- sous-thème 1: « A quelle condition seriez-vous prêt à abandonner la voiture individuelle pour un mode de transport plus respectueux de l'environnement? »
- Sous-thème 2: « Quel est le principal inconvénient du TER? »
- Sous-thème 3: « Quel service souhaiteriez-vous trouver en priorité à bord du TER? »