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The Politics of Presence:
The Effects of Online vs. Face-to-Face Deliberation

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Abstract
Poitou-Charentes Regional Government in France recently held an electronic town meeting (ETM) on climate change in cooperation with its counterparts for Tuscany and Catalonia in Italy and Spain respectively. French participation was 150 youths aged 14 to 30 years. The ETM package also included an interactive website for pre-conference debate. Termed "electronic democracy" by the organizers, the hi-tech package enabled online exchanges as well as face-to-face discussions; face-to-face data were then processed and put up for electronic voting. Results show participants retain a strong preference for face-to-face interaction, which they find less inhibiting and more fruitful. This attachment to face-to-face raises issues about the virtues of electronic democracy. Our study investigates the importance of the choice of medium for citizens to make their voices heard and for the future development of democracy.

Introduction

Studies report that online political debate may facilitate free speech by effacing social distinctions because of asynchronous online presence and absence of direct contact (Greffet & Wojcik, 2008; Gastil, 2000; Witschge, 2004). Online debate also enables actors to access websites and other sources in order to support their positions more robustly than in a face-to-face situation. These elements support the hypothesis that online debate is more rational, informed and instructive than face-to-face encounter marked by emotional outbursts, social discrimination and rules of order that inhibit free speech, especially among the less articulate and undereducated.

Actually, widespread recourse to pseudonyms, the PC screen “aquarium effect” and loose writing norms contradict this first hypothesis: while online space is indeed disinhibiting, it encourages the generation of short messages, but definitely not rational discourse (Marcoccia, 2003). Rather than reasoned exchange of viewpoints and information sharing, the upshot would be the hardening and polarization of initial opinions (Sunstein, 2001).

Pursuing this contradiction, we looked at a specific aspect of dual-track participation based on both online and face-to-face participation in order to understand the individual contributions of each discussion format on information acquisition and civic empowerment. Shelves of studies have been trying to confirm the hypotheses of Alexis de Tocqueville and John Stuart Mill asserting that participation helps spread the virtues of democracy and that deliberation builds “better” citizens (Mansbridge, 1999). “Better” means that citizens who participate in the democratic process will become more articulate, listen better and build feedback into their subsequent thinking, thus even changing their minds where the opposing argument seems more persuasive. Moreover, participation should encourage citizens to formulate demands and supporting arguments from a standpoint of the community’s best interests, not personal interest. Thus, the “good citizen” is informed, open-minded and sensitive to the common good.

While deliberative polling studies categorically affirm the positive impact of such mechanisms on influencing personal opinions and higher political awareness, studies into citizens’ panels or public meetings and informal conversation are more equivocal (Luskin, Fishkin & Jowell, 2002; Barabas, 2004a; Gastil, 2006; Hansen & Andersen, 2007). Locally, major research by Berry and his colleagues (1993) into five cases of urban democracy in the USA reports that civic participation improves tolerance, confidence in government and political efficacy. Meanwhile, French research has been investigating the acquisition of expertise (Cefaï & Lafaye, 2002; Blanc, 1999, Blatrix 1999; Carrel, 2006), although only Talpin (2006) has so far attempted to evaluate applicability.

Observation of online discussions leads to similar conclusions that contradict Sunstein's "polarization" and the support it draws from Mendelberg's (2002) research in experimental psychology.[1] Beyond the rationally argued debate among actors of differing views that happens online, we also see it leaves them more informed, empathetic and respectful of opposing views as they become more knowledgeable about the issues (Stromer-Galley, 2003, Barabas, 2004b; Iyengar *et al.*, 2004; Price, Nir & Cappel, 2006; Doury & Marcoccia, 2007). However, most studies of online discussion only sample newsgroups and instant messaging or quantitative surveys into online chatting habits. To our knowledge, comparisons of online/face-to-face discussion are all essentially based on social psychology survey protocols and never on direct observation of participatory mechanisms established by government agencies (Muhlberger, 2005; Min, 2007), except Monnoyer-Smith, 2009. For a look inside the black box of the "citizenship factory" (Carrel & al, 2009) to see how discussion format affects the average citizen's speech and then to evaluate the relative merits of online and face-to-face discussions, we felt it was necessary to combine an ethnographic approach of conversational habits with a second, global approach, that would shed light on the meaning actors ascribe to participation and which learning benefits they perceive therefrom.

Our study attempts such a comparison based on the analysis of the Ideal-EU project. In autumn 2008, Poitou-Charentes Regional Government set up an electronic town meeting (ETM) on climate change involving 150 French youth in conjunction with the regional authorities of Catalonia and Tuscany in Spain and Italy respectively. The ETM was doubled up with a dedicated interactive website for preliminary online discussion.[2] The organizers qualified the hi-tech package as "e-democracy" given that it provided for both online and face-to-face interaction, plus electronic records of debate followed up with an electronic poll open to all participants. Poll results then went into a report submitted to Euro-parliamentarian Guido Sacconi, who chairs the Temporary Committee on Climate Change of the European Parliament.

This study therefore aims to measure the impact of the Ideal-EU experience on actor learning and civic spirit. Learning can be rated according to five criteria:

- Cognitive learning about climate change
- Acquisition of deliberative skills (listening and articulation of views)
- Altruistic concern for best interests of others
- Impact on of participation on actor habits
- Post-experiment enrolment in a political party or voluntary organization, i.e. long-term effect

This paper examines the cognitive benefits of online and face-to-face deliberation in the Ideal-EU project; it then suggests hypothetical social mechanisms for the learning processes observed there. After a detailed description of the Ideal-EU project, ETM and website, we review the noteworthy educational impact on participants: a strong majority underscored the cognitive benefits of the experience and the more environment-friendly personal habits it instilled in them. However, we also found almost all participants reported learning more face-to-face than online.
We support this finding with a field survey combining direct observation of the six ETM working groups, 13 semi-directive interviews of organizers and participants, plus analyses of participant questionnaire

[1] Sunstein finds that citizens who enter a discussion with a preset opinion will leave feeling the same way more strongly, or even more radically.
[2] http://www.ideal-debate.eu/fr

data and of website postings.[3][4] In particular, we isolated the specific effect of the discussion context through point-by-point comparisons of actors who contributed only online against those contributing both online and face-to-face.

I. Innovative Deliberation Package

Project Genesis

Spanning Catalonia, Poitou-Charentes and Tuscany, the ETM package falls under the Ideal-EU project financed by the European Commission.[5] The concept essentially replicates the "21st Century Town Meetings" of America Speaks.[6] Although setting a European precedent, the ETM package used a model deployed by Tuscany in 2006/2007 to draft legislation on e-participation and healthcare reform (Freschi & Raffini, 2008). The actual methodology of e-participation came from Aventura Urbana, also broadly patterned after America Speaks.

Suboptimal Website Design

The Ideal-EU website went online in late August 2008.[7] Both moderators and registered members could start new threads and polls on issues of climate change and suggested remedies. Reference materials were 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 firewalled the Catalan, English, French and Italian components from each other because deadlines ruled out set-up of a common multilingual platform. The umbrella website now totals 1,000 members, with 700 for the French site.

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 just a virtual forum for climate change buffs and bait to enlist more ETM participants.

The Electronic Town Meeting

The tri-regional, ETM held on November 15th, 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 21st century Europe and (b) how can energy consumption savings be improved; while the afternoon sessions were isolated local deliberations, focused on regional transport and mobility in Poitou-Charentes.

ETM participants were "youngsters" between 14 to 30 years old; an age group of interest to the European Commission. Given its previous experience since 2004 with the high school participatory budget, the regional government possessed the necessary organization and mobilization resources for this ETM.[8] Consistent with the principles of "21st Century Town Meeting", participants were selected for their diversity and voluntary commitment, two imperatives not always easy to reconcile. Unlike in most

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[3] The deliberative videoconference consisted of three 60-minute discussion periods. I followed the first period at Table 212, the second and lunch at Table 205 and sampled three additional tables in the final period.

[4] Questionnaire response was 86.8% (130 out of 151 participants).

[5] 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

[6] See http://www.americaspeaks.org (Lukensmeyer & Brigham, 2005 and Wilson, 2008).

[7] http://www.idealeu-debate.eu

[8] See Sintomer, Röcke & Talpin (2009) for details.

deliberative events, ETMs enlist participants on a voluntary basis rather than random selection but in fact, Poitou-Charentes government had to campaign heavily throughout the school system before managing to co-opt practically all 150 participants.

The gender breakdown of French ETM participants was 51.5% M/48.5% F and randomized to include youth from low-income housing districts. However, participants to the Ideal-EU project with jobless parents were slightly underrepresented, while those with white collars parents were slightly over-represented.[9] Nonetheless, participation was broadly representative of the region's blue- and petty white-collar population. Despite the relative diversity, participants demonstrated greater interest and awareness of environmental issues than the general population of the region. They were also far more socially active than the average for all students: 49.5% reported involvement in the High School Participatory Budget; 40%, membership in a voluntary association and 27.5%, in a student organization.

Each table in the ETM room seated a facilitator and about 10 participants – one of them taking minutes on a laptop. For deliberation of optimal 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 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 21st Century Town Meeting experiences however, the multiple choice questions were drafted beforehand by the organizers and not derived from discussion content.

After the conference, all discussion summaries and poll results went into a 50-page report distributed to participants. On November 18, a tri-regional delegation of six participants presented a further copy to Euro-parliamentarian Guido Sacconi who chairs 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 will be informed of the project, that will be disseminated throughout 2009. From a procedural standpoint, this was a weak mini-public (Fraser, 1992; Fung, 2003), essentially intended to enlightened E.U. policymakers' judgment.

Having presented the procedural design of the Ideal-EU project, we can now move on to two key issues: what was the nature of the online and face-to-face interaction and what was the impact on participants?

[9] 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.

II. Building an Informed Citizenry: The Respective Virtues of Online and Face-to-Face Deliberation

1. When Knowledge Transfer is more obvious face-to-face than online

The Ideal-EU package clearly improved understanding of climate change issues: poll results show 93% of ETM participants felt they had learned something and 60% felt the event had sharpened their ability to articulate their views. Moreover, participants who interacted both online and face-to-face felt they had learned more than peers who only interacted face-to-face: 100% of website posters and 97.5% of website readers found the ETM package instructive. However, online participation alone did not significantly affect speaking skills.

In order to evaluate the effect of the ETM platform on knowledge transfer, we focused on the 40 participants who interacted both online and face-to-face; 30 read and posted while 10 only read. Here, one of our most striking findings is that a wide majority of participants felt they learned more face-to-face than online.

In figures, 62% who consulted postings and downloads found they had learn more face-to-face than online and 53.3% of those who also posted felt likewise. Only 36.7% of posters reported learning equally well through either channel while only a handful found online interaction more instructive. Unsurprisingly, perception of online interaction as instructive increased with frequency of visits to the website (See Appendix Fig. 2).

Table 1. Actor Perception of Learning Experience (in %)

Type of Participation	No Reply	Better Online	Better Face-to-Face	Equally Enriching	Learned Nothing
Website readers	10.0	2.5	62.5	25.0	0.0
Website reader/posters	3.3	6.7	53.3	36.7	0.0
Website & ETM participants	32.6	4.5	50.8	11.4	0.8
Averages	33.1	4.5	50.4	11.3	0.8

These results may surprise given that online argumentations are better documented than face-to-face discussions. Online content is better supported: 66.3% of postings include supporting evidence against 51.3% of ETM oral contributions.[10] Posted statements should also be better supported because of ready access to online documentation resources whereas face-to-face restricts speakers to recall and other immediately available cognitive data. Indeed, we found almost 20% of postings cited supporting links, articles, statistics, etc. against 10.3% of ETM face-to-face statements.[11]

[10] We omit full details of the coding used to compare online and face-to-face discussions, which essentially classified interaction by type and is thus of limited relevance here. We compared ETM discussion with the contents of three website threads chosen for pertinence to ETM face-to-face debate topics: "New Wind Turbines", "Risks and Consequences of Consumerism", "Clean Mobility in Poitou-Charentes". We paid especial attention to the type of supporting evidence and proof supplied; unsupported statements were classified as such and tended to be laconic, e.g. "Long live bicycles!" by BMX on Nov 14 2008 under "Clean Mobility" hereinabove.

[11] Concretely, 36 out of 181 postings cited external sources as backup against the same for 15 oral statements out of 145.

Several participants acknowledged the cognitive value of the website by comparing it to the ETM discussion booklet:

> "For me, the website allowed deepening the information we got in the discussion guide because…in fact, it put some really specific subjects on the table and…in fact, I found a few things…like, since I looked more carefully after the ETM, I found details I couldn't find in the booklet."

This participant neatly stressed another advantage of the Internet over other forums where content is ephemeral: it keeps a written record of oral contributions and offers downloads of reference materials[12], which enabled him to re-examine his own views: "Later, I had a look on the Internet, where you can review things, and question your views from the information you find." [13] Other ETM participants were lurkers saw the discussion forums as a valuable information source: "I didn't post but I read everything…I learned quite a lot I didn't know off the website."[14]
Netizens have the resources of the Internet at their disposal to develop and support their arguments; this is especially true of ETM participants, who are young and relatively computer-literate. Importantly, online contributors could take the time to think through and document their postings while the face-to-face discussions had time limits. As one participant rounded out a long posting on organic food, integrated farming and thoughtful consumerism: "I guess I pulled out all the stops. Congratulations if you managed to read it all!"[15]

In contrast, ETM speakers had only recall, credibility of sources and powers of persuasion to support their statements. That said, participants had the first 10 minutes of each session to consult facts and figures, for and against, in the discussion booklet, which helped offset these limitations of face-to-face. This shows the organizers realized that deliberation would only be meaningful if relevant data, pro and con, was made available to all participants. However, handouts of booklets are hardly as effective as proper training of the type given for consensus conferences or citizen juries and only 3.4% of oral contributions made explicit reference to the discussion guide content.[16] In short, the booklet was a rudimentary tool and ETM discussions were cognitively inferior to online exchanges.

Nonetheless, ETM discussions were of real substance. As seen below, the presence of ecological scholars, environmental experts and concerned citizens provided non-negligible cognitive input to participants:

> Frank: (Wind turbine) noise might be solved. But it takes 17 tons of concrete to build a wind turbine. And it only lasts 10 years.
> Amy: A wind turbine produces 2 megawatts. A nuclear power plant produces 900. So it takes 450 turbines to replace one, and turbines only have 25% uptime.

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12 The Ideal-EU website had a total of five PDF documents available for download, all written by the regional government.

13 Personal communication with Eric from Poitiers on Feb 4, 2009.

14 *Ibid.*

15 "Manille" in the "Risks and Consequences of the Consumer Society" thread, Nov. 19, 2008.

16 See Boy, Donnet Kamel & Roqueplo (2000) on 1998 citizens' conference training in genetically modified foods and agriculture organized by OPECST.

2. Presence as a Prerequisite to Learning

While online discussion ought to provide greater quantities of higher quality information, a wide majority of ETM participants felt they learned more from face-to-face interaction than from the website and reference materials. Several hypotheses could explain this result.

First, 65% of participants report a personal preference for face-to-face over online contact while only 33% rated them as equally enjoyable. A single participant preferred online interaction. These results may be attributable to the lively, convivial atmosphere that prevailed at the ETM.
Online discussion has an abstract feel. It is therefore less hospitable to political debate, which always has an emotional dimension that exchanges of postings do not fully communicate (Dahlgren, 2000).[17] From this standpoint, the symbolic power of a physical assembly is greater than remote messaging among members of that same assembly (Lefebvre, 2002). Indeed, some participants justified their preference for face-to-face by citing the emotional feel of the ETM. Asked "Which participation did you prefer: online or face-to-face?", one interview respondent stressed the "spontaneity" of the ETM versus the "strategic" nature of postings:

> "For me, it was the day we talked face-to-face. It was the best. There's nothing better. Really, it was super interesting. Talking face-to-face is, like, when you do a posting or email, you think about everything you say. You make it pretty, really pretty. You check you aren't saying anything you don't mean. But when you're talking, even if you say something you don't mean, you get caught. And maybe you realize you had a prejudice, so you go back over it (and) re-explain it differently."[18]

The prime value of the ETM was that it brought experts and amateurs in direct contact on an equal footing such that climate change knowledge became tangible and accessible, which had an impact, as seen in the response below from a participant who did not know oil was a fossil fuel:

> "And, I learned lots, because…there was this facilitator to start with who said lots, and then the texts, and then next to me there was this ecology student. I don't remember her name. Anyhow, some student who studied it and like, she was talking, sayings lots of stuff, and then I thought it was interesting…I learned lots about renewable energy that I never knew…I learned lots about… I didn't even know oil was a fuel, a fossil – a fossil fuel. I learned about fossil fuels."[19]

By comparison, online presentations of technical data can be daunting, particularly on the Ideal-EU website which the organizers themselves consider neither eye-pleasing nor user-friendly. Moreover, users were young netsurfing veterans who expect intuitive design that delivers instant access free of long learning curves (Fluckiger, 2006). Thus the Ideal-EU website failed to attract and retain user interest in terms of "efficiency" and "effectiveness", the two criteria laid down by Arthur Lupia and Tasha Philpot (2005) to explain why youths and seniors show discrepant degrees of interest in certain activist websites.

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[17] At cause is not the medium itself, but the lack of image or tone of voice, which deprives messages of emotional content (although high-speed networks are making image and video more widely available). In this regard, it is the writing itself that erodes emotional content rather than the virtual nature of the medium.

[18] Excerpt from interview with Marie from Châtellrault, Feb 4, 2009.

[19] Excerpt from interview with Tarik from Châtellrault, Feb 4, 2009.

Ideal-EU participants stress that information transfer works best through direct contact and physical presence. One hypothesis worthy of further research is whether deliberation is more efficient from a cognitive standpoint of information transfer and retention when "live" and "hot" than cold and remote. Perhaps echoing a need for the "inspiring teacher" who hardwires a love of learning into his students' hearts, participants experienced face-to-face deliberation as the more efficient. However, for accurate evaluation of the learning value of face-to-face deliberation, we need to check for Sunstein's (2001) "confirmatory bias", i.e. a participant's tendency to radicalize his position by interpreting and/or retaining new information within the confines of his previously established views on the topic. Nonetheless, other research into online deliberative polling notes that, although participants learn more in face-to-face, the difference is marginal (Fishkin *et al.*, 2004). Despite the relative cognitive disadvantage of face-to-face deliberation, this result gives an indication about the educational power of physical presence.

A second hypothesis for the preference of face-to-face is the "disinhibiting" nature of online discussion where participants easily become categorical, dividing personal habits into "good" and "bad" for the environment, as in: "Some person live 1 km away and take car!!! If we have less lazy person, we don't need gas."[20] Face-to-face tends to inhibit such statements that stigmatize the "lazy", which may (perhaps paradoxically) result in a friendlier more reassuring atmosphere for deliberation. Although open disagreement marks 17.2% of face-to-face contributions against an insignificantly fewer 16.6% online, disagreement finds different expression in each medium.[21] Observation of the Ideal-EU website shows that online disagreement readily becomes frank and even aggressive.[22] Indeed, some participants add rhetorical qualifiers to preempt potential counterattacks. One such example is Matac's justification for using a private vehicle, which he thinks other forum participants, whom he does not know, will condemn:

> "Right, like I know it's bad, but I'm going to be using my car a lot for the holidays for trips you can't do by train (just try going from Niort to Tulle by train!). So I'm doing Niort/Tulle/Limoges/Avignon/Marseille/Niort. And let me add my tight schedule rules out rail travel."[23]

The toning down of antagonism in face-to-face situations to avoid shunning by fellow members of a community should make discussion more pleasant, which may foster an atmosphere more conducive to changes of preference (Eliasoph, 1998; Conover Johnston *et al.*, 2002).

3. Unchanged Preferences: Training vs. Persuasion

A careful reading of actor discourse is a prerequisite to any real grasp of the manufacture and fine-tuning of individual preferences. Although 52.6% state they participated in order "to learn and become informed" and 93% added they had learned something about climate change, a striking 88.6% of Ideal-EU participants report no preference change. According to questionnaire responses, the Ideal-EU

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[20] Posting by Bangueru, "The Future of Biofuels" thread, Oct 10, 2008.

[21] Coding classifies agreement according to use of phrases such as "Like you said," "As you were saying," "True," "Indeed," and "I agree," e.g. "I agree, Savonius should be more popular in private homes and small public buildings because it's cheap at under €800." Inversely, disagreement was registered in the presence of "I disagree," "No, but", "Yes, but", "However or "Nonetheless".

[22] Given the subjective nature of assessing aggression in language, this appreciation is qualitative.

[23] Posting by Matac, "Tourism and Climate Change" forum, Oct 9, 2008.

experience was instructive and imparted knowledge about relatively technical, previously unfamiliar issues, but it did not change deep-seated opinions, as witnessed in this excerpt from a group interview below where Mathieu and Benjamin report learning "lots" but not changing their views:

> Mathieu: Me, I learned lots from others. Lots of stuff, especially from the guys I talked to, like, um, I learned stuff about… I forget what you call it… heat pits for production.
> Julien Talpin: Heat pumps?
> Mathieu: Yeah, that's it. I didn't know anything about it and now I learned a little.
> Julien Talpin: From talking to people?
> Mathieu: Yeah, right. After, in the discussion period, um, maybe I'm being negative but, people were saying what they had to say. They didn't all come to listen. Like, yeah, that's how it was to me.
> Benjamin: Me, I wanted to go in without being prejudiced. Like, just to see all the information they were going to give me. Yeah, it was hard not being prejudiced. It's hard, I admit it. But then I got say my piece too. But it's true that talking and getting the other side of the story, um, well, it didn't change my mind either, nope. But, like, I got something out of it.
> Elodie: Yes well, when you know why people think as they do, it's true that, you get to understand their points of view even if it doesn't change your mind.
> Mathieu: Everybody tells it like he sees it. You listen but, well, me, I know I came here with an opinion. I left thinking the same way.[24]

While deliberation transfers information and new elements, especially if face-to-face, it rarely changes any participant's deep-seated views, i.e. if Mathieu learned about heat pumps, he still felt the same about nuclear energy: "I left thinking the same way," he notes. How then are we to explain the immutability of personal preferences despite conversational interaction of apparently good quality, theoretically capable of inducing preferences to evolve?

The first possible reason behind the stability of opinions is poor cognitive content. Even in sophisticated deliberative experiences, participants sometimes have little real information at their disposal or everyone has the same information and discussion is almost devoid of interest. As shown above, this explanation does not apply to Ideal-EU, where opinion resisted change despite high cognitive content.

A second possibility is that speakers fail to transfer unique information in their possession because of their aggressive attitude, poor public speaking skills and lack of credibility or of audience boredom and other deficiencies. This implies that the quality of listening exerts decisive impact on the quality of a deliberation (Barber, 1984; Gambetta, 1999). However, Ideal-EU optimized listening by dividing participants into small groups chaired by a facilitator.

The only reason we see is that opinions are stable because they are far more deep-seated than allowed for under the main premise of existing deliberation theories. If opinion change was rare at the ETM, it is perhaps due to overrepresentation of committed environmental activists, as noted earlier. We hypothesize that activists have strong preferences about environmental issues and therefore any new incoming argument faces a preference inscribed in a coherent, long-established ideological scheme that resists change. As Daniel Gaxie (2002:167) notes, however persuasive that argument, it meets political, cognitive and emotional resistance to change: "It is costly for a relatively committed activist to break with deeply cherished opinions and his past." We confirmed these hypotheses at Ideal-EU, where

[24] Four-way talk held in Niort, Feb. 2, 2009.

participants holding membership in political parties or voluntary associations proved less likely to change views than peers with no such affiliations. No member of any political party, green or not, changed opinion and 93% of environmental activists likewise stood firm. A key determinant of stability of opinion is how deep-seated a given opinion actually is, i.e. how committed the activist feels.

Gaxie goes on to note that, if costliness had been the only factor at play, we might have expected more change of preference, especially among non-activist participants. To explain the very strong stability of opinion at Ideal-EU, we need to focus attention on socialization even if deliberation researchers have largely discarded this notion, as in this excerpt from Bernard Manin's rightly renowned article:

> "(Individuals) have certain preferences and some information, but these are unsure, incomplete, often confused and opposed to one another. The process of deliberation, the confrontation of various points of view, helps to clarify information and to sharpen their own preferences. They may even modify their initial objectives, should that prove necessary." (Manin, 1987: 351).

While many preferences are indeed incomplete, incoherent and even mutually contradictory, it seems adventurous to hold that coherence is proportional to the strength and stability of an opinion. One might even argue the opposite. If our interviews of Ideal-EU participants do show that the strongest preferences are the most stable, they go on to show that participants with weaker preferences are almost just as likely to stand firm. Therefore, opinion remains stable regardless of coherence or absence thereof. In effect, the determinants of preference are primary and secondary socialization, as conditioned by the spectrum of biographical elements that stake out the dynamic of her persona.[25] As Claus Offe and other deliberation theorists observe, preferences are "shaped":

> "After all, preferences that we observe are by no means randomly distributed across historical time and social space. In fact, we can fairly reliably predict at least some of the preferences of a person if we know his or her family background, national identity, economic position, associative involvement, age group, educational background, etc. Preferences emerge from and are shaped by a formative context, or background conditions." (Offe, 1997: 88).

Left solely to personal whim, preferences would be quite malleable. Being deep-seated, however, political preferences are unlikely to budge within three hours of discussion. Interestingly, the deliberation paradigm is founded upon the concept of "shaped" preferences. Disregarding the essential notion of preferences as unshakable products of rational choice that result from individual free choice, the assertion is that individual and collective preferences are vulnerable to change precisely because they have been shaped. By imposing the right procedural and institutional context, preferences can indeed be changed (Sunstein, 1991). However, focusing on context, deliberation theorists overlook the structural factors that shape personal trajectories and operate to stabilize preferences: our results

[25] Gaxie's enumeration of elements includes age, gender, family background (ethnic, social, religious, political), place of residence, memberships (cliques, school clubs, professional bodies, voluntary associations, trade unions), education, academic performance, job/function, standard of living, career path and current social status, blue/white collar, private employment/civil service, permanent/contract employment status, labor/management/freelance, employed/jobless/retired, sexual orientation and track record in school, employment, activism or even crime (Gaxie 2002, 170).

suggest socialization must weigh into the equation if we are to understand the (lack of) effects of deliberation. Although almost impotent at mind changing, deliberation does seem to improve mutual understanding and *the shaping of subsequent new preferences*.

4. Mutual Understanding and New Preferences

Whatever its failings, deliberation promotes empathy towards other preference options, however conflicting. As one participant states: "You can understand the other's views without changing your own." Fellow participant Marie adds:

> "It's weird. Just when I was leaving the debate, for the lunch break, we were still talking because the day was really intense.And so I was talking to somebody without realizing … I forget what I was saying but this guy said 'Uh huh, I don't see it like that' and I said to myself 'Ouch! I really do see it like he says.' But then later, I was at this table with people from everywhere, so…it was really interesting because we were all really different and we managed to get it together on some things. And it was just cool."
> "I remember this one guy who was really not on my wavelength, but then after he said that, I mean it's not like I wanted to be uptight about my opinions. I mean, opinions can change and I didn't want to be locked inside this box I lived in , and so, like, I told him 'You're right about that, but there's this too.' And then he said 'Yeah, but there's something else too' and in the end we had something more like a compromise or some kind of connection between what he thought and I did. Anyhow, I'm thinking a little differently now."
> "I think we were talking about regional public transport. He was saying it was a drag because of the timetables and poor facilities. And me, I was thinking we need more of it anyhow. Anyhow, I don't remember exactly but I know it was about public transport because he had a car and he saw things differently because I don't have one and I'm always walking or biking it…I understand it's a pain. I walk nine kilometers a day. Or bike it. Right now I'm walking it because I don't bike when it gets too cold. So yeah, I know it's a pain. Not everybody likes doing nine kilometers of open countryside."
> "I can understand, but I have to say he thought it was normal to do three kilometers by car. For me, three kilometers is, like, three kilometers. That's (only) half an hour on foot and 10 minutes to bike. What's his problem?"
> "The big debates were during the breaks or when everybody was talking – when we got to talk to neighboring tables."[26]

Marie repeats several times that she "understands" his arguments. This shows the ETM reached at least one prime objective of deliberation: mutual understanding (Gutmann & Thompson, 1996). She further notes that she was "thinking a little differently now" after informal discussion during a break. Because it is hard to admit a mistake and change an opinion in public, informal conversation among a smaller number of acquaintances sharing a minimum of trust is where preference changes are most likely to happen.

While change of opinion is so rare it may explain its overemphasis in the literature, the creation of new opinion is far easier. Preference change presumes the presence of an existing preference but political

[26] Marie from Châtellrault, Feb. 2, 2009

sociology demonstrated long ago that, on a majority of political issues, a majority of people holds no opinions at all, or weak and fuzzy ones at best, which are subject to extreme swings – what Philip Converse (1964) terms "non-attitudes".

One promising capability of deliberation lies in its ability to shape new opinion on issues about which deliberators know, or care, little -- not issues pegged down by entrenched opinion. As an example, Eric recalls, two months after the ETM, how he made up his mind there about wind turbines:

> Eric: Like, on wind turbines, I thought it wasn't such a bad idea, (but) as the day went on [the ETM], I was thinking they weren't such a good idea, after everything everybody was saying. Like, a wind turbine only lasts 10 years. I didn't know it takes 17 tons of concrete for a turbine. So I said to myself that if it takes 17 tons of concrete for every turbine every 10 years, there's no end to it. And for one nuclear power plant, you need 450 turbines…like, I didn't know that either. It's all these little things that tell you something and help you see things differently."
> Julien Talpin: So your opinion on wind turbines evolved?
> Eric: You see, it's just an example…And then I'm somebody who doesn't like to say he's wrong. Really, it's pretty hard, and like there on that day, well, wow! So many arguments. So much preparation. I said to myself it's awesome since it was something I hardly knew about. And well, I just listened to my friends talking because they were saying, like, pretty exact ideas about things, and so I said to myself, yeah, there's these other things too and so, yeah, I changed my mind on lots of things. There are (also) things I didn't change my mind about, and things I changed it about.

This interview reiterates conclusions already presented herein: the face-to-face ETM made a sufficiently powerful impression on participants for them to remember the arguments over two months later. Moreover, we see that, after the event, participants did review the arguments traded at the ETM discussions both formal and informal, which demonstrates that deliberation did exert decisive cognitive impact on participants.

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Appendices

Table 2. Ideal-EU Website Users

Location	Quantity
Catalonia	196
Poitou-Charentes	764
Tuscany	74
Other	142
Total	**1,176**

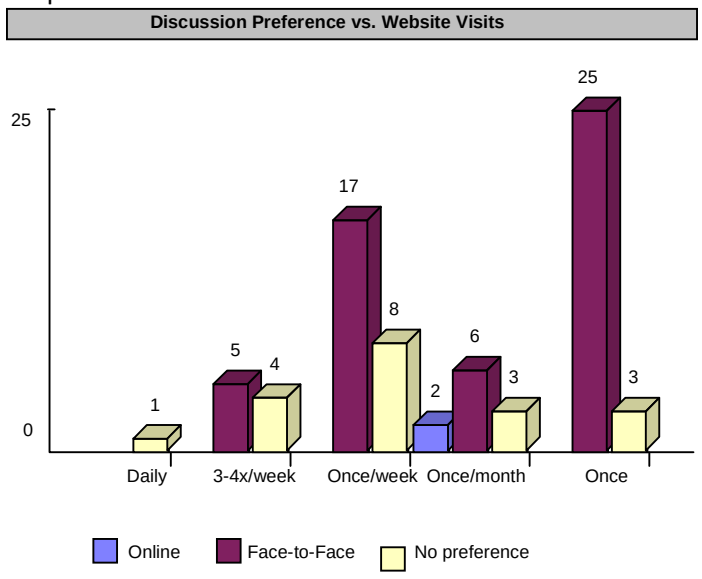
Table 3. Ideal-EU Website Postings

Location	Quantity
Catalonia	1,182
Poitou-Charentes	1,161
Tuscany	29
Other	0
Total	**2,372**

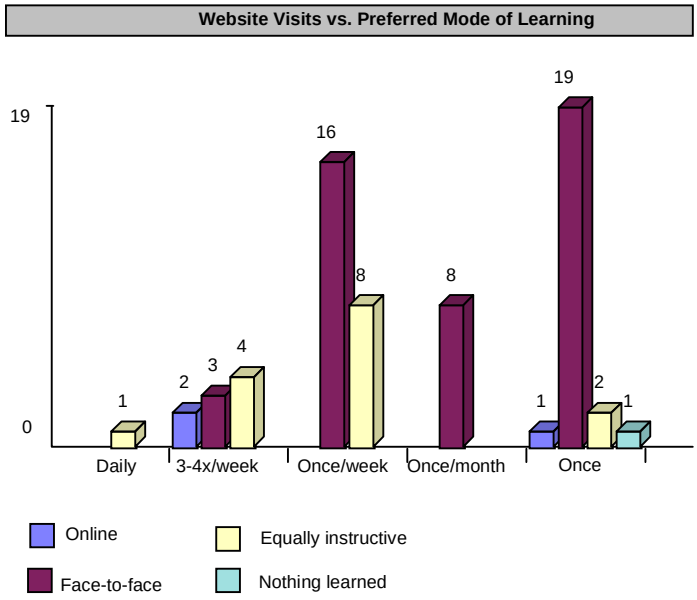
Table 4. Top 10 Topics on French Ideal-EU Website

Topic	No. of Postings
Energy savings in the school system	97
Wind turbines	82
Is climate change real?	74
Risks and consequences of a consumer society	65
Water policy	51
Peak oil	49
The future of biofuels	46
Climate change and tourism	35
Clean transport in Poitou-Charentes	34
Dry toilets	33

Graph 1. Preferred Mode of Interaction vs. Number of Website Visits



Graph 2. Preferred Mode of Learning vs. Website Visits


Website Visits vs. Preferred Mode of Learning
19
0
1
2
3
4
16
8
8
1
19
2
1
Daily
3-4x/week
Once/week
Once/month
Once
Online
Face-to-face
Equally instructive
Nothing learned