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**DOES PUBLIC PARTICIPATION  
ONLY CONCERN UPPER CLASSES ?**

***The “social oligarchisation”  
of new types of democracy***

***Cires Working Paper***

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**GUILLAUME GOURGUES<sup>(\*)</sup>, JESSICA SAINTY<sup>(\*)</sup>**

## **DOES PUBLIC PARTICIPATION ONLY CONCERN UPPER CLASSES?**

*The “social oligarchisation” of new types of democracy*

### **Abstract:**

During the last decade, a major debate was raised among political science scholars about people’s willingness to deliberate and to participate, mainly based on quantitative approaches using opinion surveys. Hibbing and Theiss-Morse argue that people do not want to participate in more direct forms of democracy despite better opportunities provided by political authorities, which only concern well-integrated citizens. By opposition, an Harvard research argue that younger people, racial minorities, and lower income people tend to participate only when public authorities offer a concrete proposition of deliberation. This argument is based on an experimental survey which compares hypothetical and concrete opportunities to deliberate. Our paper confronts this statement to real politics: could a pre-existent and real public offer of participatory deliberation concern excluded people and oppose the tendency toward social oligarchisation of local democracy? Based on a survey address to 1200 French people in 2009, we correlate knowledge and opinion of our sample about existing regional public offers of participatory deliberation. Our results are twofold. Firstly, only high-educated people, aware to political innovation, who have a good knowledge about political life, have a real knowledge about this public offer. Secondly, despite people know the existence of participatory institutional-settings they do not perceive it as a “progress”: a large proportion of respondents have a negative opinion about this trend. These empirical results lead us to argue that the non-experimental participatory/deliberative settings have serious difficulties to enlarge its public beyond the classical oligarchy of politicized people, which question the “top-down” origins of these democratic innovations.

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## **1.Introduction**

The contemporary forms of participatory and deliberative institutional-settings (Cohen Fung 2004) are mainly due to the initiative of public authorities. However, even if this settings could be seen historically as various answers to the rise of social conflicts (recurring opposition of the population to the landplaning projects, protest against public choices, rise of a “citizen’s expertness”) which are now led by active and structured lobbies or citizens groups (Kitschelt 1986; Berry 2000), it would seem that their “production” tends to be disconnected from any real request from population. Indeed, the “public offer” of participatory and deliberative settings results from an equation between several variables: changes within public action, political arrangements between parties (Scarrow 1997) and rise of a “public participation’s market” are some elements that enable public authorities to create a “public offer”, composed of several “participatory technologies”, which aims to stimulate a more active political behavior of citizens. This disconnection between supply and demand of public participation is generally considered as a problem by scholars: for instance, public participation could be turned into renewed form of paternalism or social control (Cooke Kothari 2001). Even if these theories raise potential manipulation that must be seriously considered, they often do not sufficiently take into account people’s “arts of resistance” (Williams 2004). We argue that the behavior of citizens towards public participation must be seriously studied, in order to understand the consequences of the institutionalization of public participation. Then, the disconnection between supply and demand could be analyzed with different questions: does the population want to actively participate, besides voting? What are the most popular forms of participation? Who are the activists that want to participate in public affairs?

Scholars who tried to answer these questions contradicted each other about several scientific conclusions. Firstly, some scholars highlighted the growing correlation between attachment to representative democracy and use of protesting (strike, demonstration) or direct forms of political participation (referendum). For instance, the French population would expresses a “satisfaction towards French democracy, a strong attachment to the principle of the election and an aspiration for more direct democracy, more participation, by referendum or protest, which could be observed today in the majority of Western countries” (Grunberg Mayer 2003, p. 218). On the other side, based on the European Values Survey (2008), other

scholars argue that “the citizen request for more participatory forms of political participation is not increasing anymore in 2008, on the contrary, it slightly decreases” (Magni-Berton 2009, p. 277). If the politicized people and the women ask more participation than other social categories, this global decrease leads us to wonder about the stability of “the request for participatory democracy in the future”: “is it progressively disappearing or has it still its best days ahead?” (Magni-Berton 2009 p. 276). Yet, these debates lean on a very vague definition of the “request” for participatory democracy: this claim is sometimes defined as a kind of synthesis between various protesting actions (to sign a petition, to publicly express oneself, even to organize a “wild strike”), sometimes as a post-materialist value, comparable and opposable with other values, such as “freedom of speech”, “law and order enforcement” or the “fight against the rise of the prices”<sup>1</sup>. Consequently, to define participatory democracy as a “public offer” of institutional-settings, as we propose to do here, involves keeping away from these debates.

Indeed, to compare the rise of “the offer” to the lack of social “request” for public participation leads us to another controversy: does the population really want to participate to the participatory settings which are proposed by public authorities? Does it want to take the opportunities to participate? Some surveys could suggest that the French population potentially ask these opportunities: according to a survey of the Interregional Observatory of the Politics, carried out in 2004<sup>2</sup>, 56.5% of French people “want to be consulted” by their regional representatives, and 77.1% declare themselves ready to participate in a public meeting (51.6% rather in evening, 25.5% rather the weekend)<sup>3</sup>. However, the huge efforts of public authorities to attract participants towards the participatory settings (Gourgues 2010) indicate that these statements are far from being representative of a global tendency. Thus, in

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<sup>1</sup> Christophe Prémât (2009) also compares this “request” for more participation to the rise of post-materialists values, in the case of Germany and France.

<sup>2</sup> The question is the following: “[Q25] the regional representatives of [name of the region] were elected in March 2004. During the six next years;

- I wish to be consulted, somehow or other, about the mains problems of the region.

- I don’t want to be consulted. They must implement the program on which they were elected.

- I don’t know”

The sample of 11301 individual is mainly favorable to the first opinion. Source: OIP, 2004.

<sup>3</sup> In the same survey, an additional question is asked to those who want to be consulted: “Would you be ready to participate in meetings to discuss decisions concerning the region? Rather in evening; Rather the weekend; You don’t have time; You don’t know; (Non-response); (Non-concerned)”. However, the formulation of this question strongly induces the answers in favor of participation.

order to clarify the link between supply and demand of participation, we propose to focus on data produced by our own survey, which enable us allowing to concretely measuring the link between a precise public offer of participation, in our case French regional offer, and the will of the targeted populations to participate.

To present our main results, we propose to divide our paper in three parts. After having presented the originality of our data, which enable us to measure the knowledge and taste of the population for concrete and plethoric participatory offer (I and II), we show that upper classes (in a sociological sense) are the most aware and interested in public participation : public offer produces a kind of “social oligarchisation” (III). In other words, institutional-settings mainly concern individuals who were already included within politics. However, among these individuals, the “public offer” is not elected by plebiscite: their opinions about participatory democracy are as much favorable as unfavorable. They do not consider it neither as a “progress” nor as a “manipulation” but remain uncertain. These results lead us to engage a discussion about the social influence of renewed types of democracy, and its capacity to convince the poorest people of its usefulness.

## **2.Contributions and limits of our survey: confronting the “concrete and existing offer” to its social request.**

Since the beginning of the 2000’s, an academic controversy opposes scholars affirming that citizens do not want to join the participatory offer, to those affirming the contrary. However, these various works about the “supply and demand connection” lean on a fluctuating definition of public offer: sometimes not really define, sometimes restricted to a single setting (such as referendum), sometimes experimental, the public offer is rarely defined as a set of existing settings (a). The originality of our own survey is to enable us to confront an existing public offer to the public opinion, within a contextualized framework (at a regional level), which involves some identifiable limits (b).

### *a) From hypothetical to concrete offer.*

The studies of John Hibbing and Elisabeth Theiss-Morse (2002) could be considered as the starting point of this controversy. The two authors argue that there is not true social “request” for deliberation in the American society: the multiplication of the opportunities to participate and/or deliberate does not answer to any popular aspiration. Actually, American citizens would prefer a model of democracy in which they can stay in the background of

public affairs, because of responsibility and integrity of decision-makers. This model is named *stealth democracy* by the authors, and follows the normative argument of the “realistic” models of democracy<sup>4</sup>. According to these theories, the stability of the democratic system would require a limitation of the citizens’ requests towards the system. For instance, Robert Dahl (1994) argued that democracies are structured by a fundamental antagonism between effectiveness and participation: the second could threaten the first by the excessive production of contradictory requests. A “good” democratic system would be a system in which enlarged public participation is not necessary. Within the population, confidence and trust into the system are inversely proportional to the will to participate. In stealth democracy model, public participation only gets involved as a last resort.

Methodologically, Hibbing and Theiss-Morse mainly used opinion polls and focus groups. These surveys reveal that two preferences (trust in the government/claim for more direct forms of participation) are strongly correlated. Without arguing for the implementation of stealth democracy, J. Hibbing and E. Theiss-Morse challenge scholars who argue that the most public authorities settle opportunities to participate and deliberate, the most they restore the political interest and activism of citizens (for an outline of this position cf. Fishkin 1995; Putnam 2000). Contrary to this argument, the two authors postulate that the political apathy of the population is an incontrovertible problem. Population only participates in case of serious failure of the system, and hardly tolerates more than some marginal settings of direct voting. These positions were partly confirmed by the survey led by Shaun Bowler, Todd Donovan and Jeffrey Karp (2007) concerning the popular support to the referendums. Generally perceived as very high, this support is rarely questioned in itself. The analysis of this support is based on the 2004 ISSP survey<sup>5</sup> which integrates sixteen countries. More precisely, they intend to test two rival assumptions: the first assumption argues that the citizens who have renewed democratic values (the “engaged”) are the most inclined to approve the multiplication of participation opportunities and referendums. The second assumption, inspired by the work of J. Hibbing and E. Theiss-Morse, predicted that the most dissatisfied citizens regarding the democratic system (the “enraged”) are the principal supports of referendums, which confirms

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<sup>4</sup> This expression was suggested by Carole Pateman (1970) to name the theories of democracy which were inspired by economy.

<sup>5</sup> More precisely: « The ISSP Citizenship module included a question asking how important it is in a democracy "that people be given more opportunities to participate in public decision making." [...] “It is important to note that this attitude is somewhat distinct from approval of using referendums, and these two questions were placed far from each other in the survey.” (Bowler Donovan Karp 2007, p. 357)



its populist anchorage (Barnay Laycock 1997). This survey presents two main results. On the one hand, a very clear distinction appears between the undefined will to opportunities of participation and the precise will to participate to a referendum<sup>6</sup>. Even if the *engaged* and the *enraged* want more opportunities, the most active and trustful citizens (“engaged”) seems to be the most ready to participate in a direct vote<sup>7</sup>. In other words, even if distrust or engagement lead citizens to claim more opportunities of participation, nothing could guarantee that this support will be followed by a concrete political engagement:

“We suggest that the answer to this question may be that many citizens are attached to a delegate model of representation more than a fully participatory view of democracy, and they see direct democracy *not as a method to govern by but as a mean to better instruct their representatives*. This view is consistent with the argument derived from Hibbing and Theiss-Morse proposing that support for direct democracy is rooted in evaluations of how representative government is working (or, more accurately, failing to work).” (Bowler Donovan Karp 2007, p. 359)

The desire to control (*keep-watching*) the government is more rooted in a fear about a too important influence of the interest groups and the integrity of elected officials than in a desire to share the decision-making process. The will to keep-watch is strongly correlated with the imprecise wish of greater opportunities to participate. The population supports the use of referendum because of its distrust of the political elites and not because of its taste for direct democracy. The international comparison shows the same pattern in different cultural and political contexts<sup>8</sup>. Then, the participatory offer relies on a fundamental mistake: global support for referendum is confused with a social demand for more participatory settings.

However, these results were contested by a research team from Harvard University (Neblo *et al.* 2009). Yet, their argument leans on a redefinition of the “public offer” of

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<sup>6</sup> The weak correlation between the two variables is a first indication: “Responses to the two questions are only weakly correlated ( $r = .14$ ) in the United States and  $-.07$  at the aggregate level). However, if widespread approval of direct democracy reflects mass preferences for increasing the opportunities people have to participate in politics, then expectations of greater participation should be related to approval of referendums” (Bowler Donovan Karp 2007, p. 354)

<sup>7</sup> This gap exists in every country: “In several nations, people most satisfied with how democracy is working, and those most interested in politics, are also significantly more likely to support using referendums to decide important matters of policy” (Bowler Donovan Karp 2007, p. 357)

<sup>8</sup> The authors make much of the exception of Switzerland. Indeed, in this country, the support for the referendum is broader than in other countries. The authors explain it by the long history of this practice: “The only case where the direction of this link is reversed is Switzerland, where expectations for more opportunities come from the least interested. This may reflect the unique context of Switzerland where the existing, expansive use of direct democracy may act to incorporate the politically interested more so than in other nations” (Bowler Donovan Karp 2007, p. 356)

participation. The team argues that the two preferences (trust/direct forms of participation) are exclusive and formulate a new assumption: the citizens are ready to actively participate only if they have the proof that the leaders intend to reinforce democracy. In other words, the more they trust participatory reforms, the more they participate. This assumption directs two critics against stealth democracy. First of all, these theories do not really define what they call “public offer of participation”: in the survey’s questionnaire, the concrete forms of participation or deliberation have never been specified to the interviewed. In addition, these theories present a straight dichotomy between participation and corruption, without another alternative. To test their assumption, the Harvard researchers propose a third way: citizens are invited by the interviewers to participate in different concrete experiments of public participation and deliberation. The aim of this method is to measure the influence of the “quality” of participation supply on demand.

First of all, the team proceeds to an opinion poll which makes appear three groups of individuals: those whose prefer *stealth democracy* (to participate in order to correct the failures of the systems), those who claim for a *deliberative democracy* (the experiments of participation and deliberation stimulates the will to participate), and a third group more ambiguous?. However, the survey shows that despite the presence of *stealth* individuals, the majority of the citizens are close to the *deliberative* profile. According to this result, the Harvard researchers try to understand how the “quality” or the ‘type” of public offer could enhance the shift from a reactive (*stealth*) to a proactive (*deliberative*) behavior: “In fact, we agree that many people would settle for stealth democracy given a restricted range of choices. However (...) it is not what they ultimately prefer if they believe that effective *republican consultation*<sup>9</sup> might be available”. The survey presents concrete opportunities of participation to a random sample of citizens, namely “direct, real-time deliberation among citizens, and direct, real-time deliberation between citizens and their elected representatives” (Neblo *et al.* 2009, p. 11). Instead of limiting the study to a potential offer of participation, as in the case of a possible referendum (Bowler Donovan Karp 2007), the research team chooses to propose

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<sup>9</sup> The authors define it namely: “By “republican consultation” we mean communication between citizens and their representatives in which the representatives seek input from their constituents in forming agendas, and in advance of their formal votes, as well as efforts to explain their votes to constituents post hoc, rather than delegate instructions” (Neblo *et al.* 2009, p. 11). This definition is close to what Archon Fung *et Erik O. Wright* (2003) call Empowered Participatory Governance.

two distinct offers: an imaginary offer and a real offer. If the imaginary offer is proposed with a single question<sup>10</sup>, the real offer is a deliberative experience, specifically organized by the research team to invite interviewed people<sup>11</sup>. In addition to the controlled sociological variables<sup>12</sup>, the survey tries to measure the possibility of making evolve/move interviewed (from the stealth profile towards the deliberative profile) via various experimentations<sup>13</sup>, but also by a regular modification of the hypothetical offer's form. The design of this offer – length of deliberation, type of interaction (direct or virtual), topic of the deliberation (specific or general), presence/absence of other actors (elected), financial compensation – varies from a random group to another (principle of split sample), according to:

“Recently there has been interest in helping regular citizens get more input into the policy process. For example, many organizations run [*one day / one hour*] sessions where citizens [*come together / use the internet*] to discuss [*important issues / immigration policy*] [*<none>; with local officials; with their Member of Congress*]. [*<none>; Participants get \$25 as thanks for their involvement.*]” (Neblo *et.al.* 2009, p. 15)

This experiment shows that a majority (83%) expresses the will to participate, even if a persistent minority remains close to stealth profile. The design of the offer provokes significant changes. These results are confirmed and accentuated in the second phase of the investigation. Indeed, 75% of the randomly selected sample accepts the invitation to participate and 35% of these volunteers concretely participated in the experiments. These results bring new elements concerning stealth individuals: faced with this proposal, a lot of them finally accept to participate. This shift of preferences is explained in two ways by the team: the ambiguity of the individuals and the fundamental difference existing between a

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<sup>10</sup> The offer is hypothetical, insofar it is never suggested that the surveyed people will invited to participate in a precise experiment.

<sup>11</sup> The experience takes the shape of a direct deliberation about the immigration policies, via an Internet forum, among citizens and members of congress. The citizens from thirteen districts are invited to participate in the experiment, at the dates and hours which were indicated to them. The presence of representatives with different tendencies and opinions about immigration (thirteen sum-total) is guaranteed by an NGO (The Congressional Management Foundation).

<sup>12</sup> The team controls the sociological variables which influence participation (activity, income, education) but also some variables of attitude: interest for politics, need to learn and evaluate or conflict avoidance.

<sup>13</sup> For instance, the “sunshine” effect aims to present two concurrent opinions (negative or positive) about the same issue. Consequently, a question of about representatives is asked in two different ways:

- [Stealth 1] Elected officials would help the country more if they would stop talking and just take action on important problems.

- [Sunshine 1] It is important for elected officials to discuss and debate things thoroughly before making major policy changes.

The assumption is that a positive presentation of the debate can convince the individuals to participate.

referendum and a deliberative offer. If one proposes to the most stealth citizens a concrete opportunity to deliberate, they will accept. The offer is perceived as a “proof” of the integrity of decision-makers, which contradicts the stereotypes and opens real spaces of deliberation and participation. It acts as a stimulus for a more deliberative attitude:

« We actually agree with Hibbing and Theiss-Morse to a large extent – i.e., that most citizens prefer stealth democracy to direct democracy (which is not the same as deliberative democracy), and more direct democracy to the status quo. However, we extend, by one more step, the same move that they make regarding direct democracy. That is, just as with the apparent desire for more direct democracy, people do not really hold Stealth democracy as their first preference. Instead, they will settle for Stealth democracy if the civics textbook version of deliberative representative democracy is not achievable » (Neblo *et al.* 2009, p. 24)

One of the major insights of this survey concern the link between deliberative profile and inequalities: the less favored social groups particularly claim for more opportunity to participate. Contrary to Hibbing and Thiess-Morse which argue that public participation mainly concerns a minority of ultra-politicized individuals (*political junkies*), the Harvard team argues that a concrete opportunity of participation is able to attract publics which are usually excluded from politics:

“Younger people, racial minorities, and lower income people are significantly more willing to deliberate, all of which are reversals from traditional participation patterns. Similarly, women, less partisan people, and non-church goers are slightly more likely to want to deliberate, though not to a statistically significant degree. On these criteria, it would appear that the kinds of people attracted to deliberation are fairly distinct from those drawn to partisan politics and interest group liberalism, consistent with deliberative democracy’s claim to provide an outlet for those frustrated with status quo politics” (Neblo *et al.* 2009, p. 17).

According to this final “social” argument, these results seem to justify the development of Empowered Participatory Governance throughout the world (Fung and Wright 2003). However, an empirical problem remains with this survey: the offer used by the research team is created for the needs of the survey, and remains experimental and in this way artificial. Thus, one could object that the survey itself creates a specific interaction in which the

individuals are encouraged to answer favorably (Zaller Feldman 1992; Tourangeau Scraped Rasinski 2000). The implicit argument of this experiment seems obvious: decision-makers could mandate scholars<sup>14</sup> to imagine good design for public participation. Whereas the existing public offer of participation is nowadays broad and varied, it does not constitute the empirical base explored by these surveys.

Indeed, the majority of the existing and observable participatory settings are the result of permanent adjustments and translations, about the objectives or the procedures (Barnes *et al.* 2007). Consequently, we cannot take for granted the results of the Harvard team for at least two reasons: the existence of public offer remains largely ignored by the population and could be perceived as manipulation. Thus, we propose to modify the empirical basis of the study of supply/demand link: neither imaginary, nor specific, the offer we consider here exists for real. It was created by public institutions themselves, it is already experimented and it is not modifiable by researchers. It takes various designs: participatory budgets, citizen's conferences, public meetings, permanent advisory authorities or users committees (transport, health, formation). This plural offer enables us to test at the same time the effects of several settings. By preserving the methods used by previously quoted works (opinion poll and statistical processing), we propose to study the impact of an existing public offer on social demand.

*b) Scope and limits of the French regional public offer to participation.*

Our survey, entitled "Context, cognition, deliberation"<sup>15</sup>, uses a specific territorial framework, French regional councils, which recently developed a public offer of participation. Our investigation, in three steps, is based on previous qualitative surveys which study the development of participatory settings at the regional scale in France (Gourgues 2009 and 2010; Mazeaud 2010; Talpin Sintomer 2011).

Firstly, the knowledge of participatory democracy, as a theme and as a public offer, is measured. The first questions measures the level of citizens' knowledge about participatory

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<sup>14</sup> This type of services can completely be settled by scholars: it is notably the case of the German Planungszelle, led by the sociologist Peter Dienel, or many deliberative polls, led by James Fishkin and Robert Luskin (Sintomer 2007).

<sup>15</sup> For a complete description of the methodology, see Annex 1.

democracy, firstly defined as a political “theme”<sup>16</sup>. Then, we ask to people « knowing » participatory democracy to quote some participatory settings<sup>17</sup> : for each region, a list of existing regional participatory settings is provided to the interviewers<sup>18</sup>, without being communicated to the surveyed people. However, we must underline one of the limits of our survey: the public regional offer of participation is more recent than the municipal, national<sup>19</sup> or foreign<sup>20</sup> offers. Thus, regional offer is less anchored within the institutional and political landscape of French population, despite the important public communication set by the regional councils about their participatory settings. Moreover, the regional councils themselves suffer from a chronic deficit of popular recognition (Dupoirier 1998; Reynié Roy 2004). In this context, we cannot reasonably expect from the surveyed people that they easily quote regional settings. However, the regional offer has the advantage to be limited and thus controllable: to use the regional offer enable us to construct a complete panorama of the public offer of participation on a given territory and to measure the gap between what it exists and what it is known. Indeed, the answers are immediately re-coded, by interviewers, according to the provided list. Consequently, we can classify two types of “knowledge” about participatory democracy: a first degree of “theme knowledge” (know the theme but not quote any settings) and a second degree of “offer knowledge” (know the theme and quote settings). According to these two degrees, one can identify three groups of individuals: firstly, individuals who do not know the theme (1); secondly, individuals who know the theme without identifying any existing offer (2); thirdly, individuals who know both theme and offer (3).

Secondly, the survey provides information about perceptions and opinions of citizens about participatory democracy. Four questions of opinion are asked to the second and third categories of individuals, that we call the “insiders”. These questions are divided in two groups: two questions give “positive” opinions (participatory democracy improves decision-making and the dialogue between representatives and citizens<sup>21</sup>) and two other questions give “negative” opinion (participatory democracy corresponds to manipulation and mainly aim to

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<sup>16</sup> The question is: “Have you already heard about participatory democracy, that is to say institutional-settings which aim to associate citizens to decision-making process? »

<sup>17</sup> The question is: “Do you know examples of participatory settings in your region? »

<sup>18</sup> The lists of settings lean on a general survey made by Guillaume Gourgues on behalf of the *Association des Régions de France* (ARF), as part of his PhD (Gourgues 2009).

<sup>19</sup> We can quote for instance the National Commission of the Public Debate (Revel and Al 2007).

<sup>20</sup> We can quote, for instance, the participatory budgeting in Porto Alegre (Abers 1996; Baiocchi 2003).

<sup>21</sup> “Participatory democracy improves political decisions” and “Participatory settings are a way to better listen and take into account the expectations of citizens” (positive)

improve popularity of representatives<sup>22</sup>). For each questions, individuals must give their degree of agreement<sup>23</sup>. Instead of measuring the desire to participate in a direct invitation, we identify *three potential groups* among the insiders:

- A first potential group with exclusive preferences, comparable to *stealth* profile: they disagree with the two “positive” questions, and they agree with the two “negative” questions. People do not trust participatory reforms.
- A second potential group with exclusive preferences, comparable to *deliberative* profile: they agree with the two positive questions, and they disagree with the two negative questions. People trust participatory reforms.
- A third group potential with non-exclusive preferences.

Our objective is to study the influence of the public offer on these opinions: how the “insiders” perceive public offer? Do they perceive it as the sign of a political opening? Does the “degree” of knowledge make a difference (the most they know the offer the most they support it)? Our goal is to confront the Harvard team arguments to concrete empirical settings, in order to understand if the public offer is likely to drive people to have a more “participatory” behavior. Moreover, we aim to describe the sociological profile of the various groups we identified above, by controlling several variables. First of all, we can suppose that some categories of population own some cultural or economic characteristics which make them more sensitive to the participatory settings. It is the case, for instance, of the inhabitants of metropolitan areas, where participatory settings are particularly numerous (Prémat 2009)<sup>24</sup> or the case – according to the Harvard team – of traditionally dominated publics, such as women or have-nots, who can find a resource for action and emancipation in participatory democracy (Young 2000). Then, we can also suggest that some categories of public will be more sensitive to political “innovation”, defined as “institutions or policies which are currently implanting in the public sphere” (Percheron 1991, p. 401). Traditionally, political innovations are favorably perceived by “highly-educated groups with high socio-professional

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<sup>22</sup> “Participatory settings are just illusion” and “Participatory settings are used to increase the popularity of political leaders” (negative).

<sup>23</sup> The question is: “Here are some opinions that one could hear about participatory democracy. Can you tell me if you completely agree, partially agree, partially disagree or completely disagree with these opinions”

<sup>24</sup> We will not consider the assumption of a territorial differentiation, for instance between regions. Our previous works (Gourgues Sainty 2009) showed that the region slightly influenced the knowledge of participatory democracy.

status and strong interest and knowledge in politics” (*Idem*). Consequently, the most politicized citizens would be the most favorable to participatory democracy, which could be considered as political innovation. Lastly, the participatory democracy could also be more attractive to individuals who remain highly integrated within representative system: activists or attentive spectators of the political life. The over-representation of some categories of participants, who are already strongly involved in politics, is a recurring result of qualitative analyses of participatory processes. Thus, we will test correlations between degree of knowledge, opinions and socio-economic characteristics, political socialization and political knowledge<sup>25</sup>.

### **3. The public of participatory democracy: a social and skeptical oligarchy**

According to the results from our survey, we can highlight two major findings. Firstly, participatory democracy mainly concerns “upper class”: the most people own economic and sociologic resources, the most they know the existence of participatory democracy (a). Secondly, knowing participatory democracy does not obligatorily mean to appreciate it. A lot of those who know participatory democracy remain sceptic or at least uncertain about its aim and effects (b). In other words, the existing participatory offer cannot be interpreted according to the Harvard assumptions because of two difficulties. In one hand, it seems very hard to reach the most dominated populations. In the second hand, the judgment about participatory democracy remains deeply correlated to the judgment about the whole political system.

#### *a) An “upper class” phenomena?*

The first question of general knowledge (table 1) indicates that participatory democracy, as a theme, is known by 47.4% of the surveyed people, which proves its certain popularity, even if the majority of the surveyed people still declare their ignorance. However, this first degree of knowledge quickly appears as superficial; only 8.2% of the surveyed people can quote an existing participatory setting. Most of the time, the knowledge of participatory democracy is not correlated to a direct experiment of local or regional participatory settings.

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<sup>25</sup> The variables which were used for the analysis are: size of city, gender, socio-professional category, degree of education, political socialization, political activism, interest for politics and an index of political knowledge (built with a Multiple Components Analysis - ACM).



**Table 1. Knowledge of participatory settings<sup>26</sup>**

Knowledge of participatory settings	Total
Know precise settings	8,2%
Only know the theme	39,3%
Don't know	52,5%
Total	100%

The analysis of the answers concerning the participatory settings leads us a little more to put into perspective this knowledge. Indeed, among the individuals affirming to know participatory settings (table 2), 33% of them finally do not quote any settings. More precisely, they quote some political events that cannot be considered as institutional participatory settings<sup>27</sup>. So 67% of the surveyed people are able to quote institutional participatory settings: they mostly quote municipal settings (27 occurrences), such as districts or meetings councils, and regional settings (40 occurrences). Even if French regional participatory offer is progressively becoming an established brand among participatory democracy settings, municipal and infra-municipal settings are still the most quoted and known participatory settings. Despite our “regional” scope, the majority of the “insiders” quote local and municipal settings: the public that we study could be easily compared to classical public of local democracy.

These results show that participatory democracy does not necessarily correspond to institutional settings or experiments for citizens. It is primarily understood as slogan or rhetoric, referring to elements of political debate or institutional communication. We could suppose the national political debates during the last French presidential election campaign in 2007, and more precisely the controversies about the proposition of the socialist candidate to settle “citizens’ juries”<sup>28</sup>, have popularized the theme without giving many details about

<sup>26</sup> The three individuals who have answered “I don’t know” were excluded from the sample..

<sup>27</sup> An example often quote is the referendum about the privatization of the French mailing service organized by trade unions and left-wing political parties, which was led few weeks before the survey

<sup>28</sup> About this controversy, see the introduction of the Yves Sintomer’s book (2007). This controversy is one of the most media-related events of the French political life concerning participatory democracy. We could also

existing procedures. Consequently, it appears that the most politicized and integrated people know the best participatory democracy.

**Table 2. Knowledge of participatory settings (N=100)**

Know examples of participatory settings	%
Institutional settings quoted	67%
<i>Regional settings</i>	27%
<i>Municipal Settings</i>	40%
No settings or other settings	33%
<i>Mail privatization Referendum</i>	9%
<i>No settings</i>	10%
Total	100%

Indeed, the correlations between various controlled variables and the degree of knowledge (Table 3) confirm this assumption. Some variables have few effects. The size of cities has a very limited effect on knowledge. The potentially most exposed and concerned publics do not seem more attentive to participatory democracy. On the contrary, the more “upper” and “free” public (retired persons for instance) have the best knowledge. Thus, the top executives and the liberal professions appear as the best “experts” of participatory democracy (Table 4): 69% of these categories know the “theme”, 15% know the “offer”, and only 16.5% are totally ignorant. Afterwards, the middle-class professions are the second category of “experts”: indeed, like the top executives, the rate of “experts” is higher than the rate of “ignorant”. Those who know the less participatory democracy are the employees and the workmen, with respectively 67% and 74% of these categories affirming to not know participatory democracy. The retired and non-working persons have a rather solid knowledge of the “theme” (respectively 39% and 36%), even if they are less numerous than middle-class professions to know the “offer”. In other words, participatory democracy is primarily known by individuals who own material and temporal resources, corresponding to “upper class”. We meet again the captive public attracted by political innovation, evoked by Annick Percheron. Logically, the

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suggest that the electoral campaign for local or regional elections, as well as the communication of the various local authorities, have largely contribute to diffuse the term of “participatory democracy” through population.

knowledge must be favored by a strong interest in political life. Our three politicization variables<sup>29</sup> are correlated to the knowledge (table 3), confirming this assumption. Interest in politics is the best correlated variable, following by the participation in demonstrations and family political discussions at a young age. Moreover, the correlation between our index of “political knowledge” and the knowledge of participatory democracy confirm that the politicized public remains more aware of participatory democracy, and could be the most determinant variable. Indeed, the individuals who know precisely participatory democracy (offer) are those who have the most important political knowledge: 65% of them belong to the higher category of the index (PK++ category – see table 5).

**Table 3: Knowledge of participatory democracy and socio-political variables<sup>30</sup>**

Variables	R
Size of cities	0,121
Socio-political categories	0,135
Gender	0,148
Political discussion with parents at 15 years old	0,248
Participating in demonstration	0,306
Degree of education	0,321
Interest in politics	0,428
ACM index of “political knowledge”	0,464

**Table 4: Socio-professional category and knowledge of participatory democracy**

Knowledge of participatory democracy	Socio-professional category							
	Farmers	Artisans/ entrepreneurs	Top executive / Liberal profess.	Middle-class profess.	Employ.	Workmen	Retired	Non-working
Offer	8,3%	5,0%	14,7%	13,2%	5,0%	4,0%	7,8%	7,1%
Theme	25,0%	27,5%	68,8%	51,9%	28,2%	22,1%	39,1%	35,7%
Ignorant	66,7%	67,5%	16,5%	34,9%	66,8%	73,8%	53,1%	57,1%
<i>Total</i>	<i>100%</i>	<i>100%</i>	<i>100%</i>	<i>100%</i>	<i>100%</i>	<i>100%</i>	<i>100%</i>	<i>100%</i>

<sup>29</sup> The questions are: “When you were approximately 15 years old, do you participate in political discussions with your parents? Often/from time to time/never”, “Did you already participate in a demonstration? Yes, often/Yes, sometimes/Yes, once at least /No, never” and “Are you interested in politics? A lot/quite/not really/not at all”.

<sup>30</sup> All the correlations are significant to the threshold of 0,00.

**Table 5: Political Knowledge (PK) and knowledge of participatory democracy**

ACM Index of Political Knowledge (PK)	Knowledge of participatory democracy			
	Offer	Theme	Ignorant	<i>Full sample</i>
PK - -	4,0%	12,2%	39,2%	25,7%
PK -	5,0%	24,2%	31,0%	26,2%
PK +	26,0%	26,9%	20,4%	23,4%
PK ++	65,0%	36,6%	9,4%	24,6%

Consequently, we argue that participatory democracy mainly concerns a kind of “social oligarchy”, composed of “upper class” individuals who benefit from favorable social and economic resources and are already politically active. We use the term of “oligarchy” according to the Michel’s definition. Indeed, for Roberto Michel (1915), political parties are structured by an “iron law of oligarchy” which imposes the rise of restricted and coherent elites, composed by individuals who share social and/or economical characteristics, as political top-leaders. Extended to the whole political system, this “iron law” signifies that politics only concerns a restricted social group, most of the time the wealthiest. Our main point here is to show the stability of this “iron law” from representative to participatory democracy. Contrary to the classical “realistic” democratic theories which easily admit that the majority of population remains “apathetic” towards public affairs (Schumpeter 1953; Sartori 1967), participatory democracy is precisely based on a large activism. However, according to our empirical results about institutional and contemporary participatory settings, it seems that the two forms of democracy (representative and participatory) concern the same social groups, in other words, creates the same kind of social oligarchy.

Indeed, this result opens a debate about the “inclusive” dimension of the existing public participation. Public participation mainly affects individuals who are already sensitive to political life and do not need to be “integrated” within it. Thus, the methodology of the Harvard team appears as highly problematic: even if random selection of deliberative experiments can “prove” that the poorest people can participate and want to, it seems unrealistic to expect that existing public participatory offer should be perceived in the same way. This micro-focused method does not solve the macro-sociological dilemma of the

unequal access to information. In other words, is it become necessarily to use random selection and specific methodology to attract the most dominated people towards public participation? Indeed, the fact that public participation must systematically introduce corrective instruments (random selection, call to participation) to reach a distant population, is a pessimistic indication of its “artificiality” which cannot be ignored.

*b) Uncertain citizens.*

Beyond these first results, we also study the perception of the public offer among “insiders”: is it perceived as the sign of a political progress? Is it suspected of manipulating? Our four variables of perception enable us to provide some answers. Starting to our three *potential groups* (see p. 8) that provide us some hypotheses, we can distinguish five concrete profiles, according to our results. We must present now that way we deal with these results. The opinion questions, presented above, are re-organized in two groups of concurrent preferences: the first group opposes the opinion that participatory democracy could be an “improvement of decision-making” to the opinion that it is “an illusion”. This first group of opposite preferences produces three “initial” profiles: *deliberative* profile (it improves and it is not an illusion), *stealth* profile (it does not improve and it is an illusion); *uncertain* profile (*ie* someone who agrees or who disagrees with both views). The second group of concurrent preferences opposes the opinion that participatory democracy is a good way to “listen citizens” to the opinion that it aims to “improve the leaders’ popularity”<sup>31</sup>. This second group enables us to refine our profiles to finally obtain five profiles:

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<sup>31</sup> The exact questions were: “Participatory settings are a way to better listen and take into account the expectations of citizens” (positive) and “Participatory settings are just illusion” (negative).

**Table 6: Profiles of opinions about participatory democracy**

<b>Profiles</b>	<b>Responses</b>
<i>Full deliberative</i> profile	Individuals who argue that participatory democracy: - improves decisions - is not an illusion - is a way to better listen citizens - is not a way to improve the popularity of leaders
<i>Partial deliberative</i> profile	Individuals who argue that participatory democracy: - improves decisions - is not an illusion - <i>Random responses to other opinions</i>
<i>Full stealth</i> profile	Individuals who argue that participatory democracy: - does not improve decisions - is an illusion - is not a way to better listen citizens - is a way to improve the popularity of leaders
<i>Partial stealth</i> profile	Individuals who argue that participatory democracy: - does not improve decisions - is an illusion - <i>Random responses to other opinions</i>
<i>Uncertain</i> profile	Individuals who provides random responses to the four opinions.

According to this typology, our results show that individuals who know participatory democracy (as a “theme” or an “offer”) remain mainly uncertain about its political sense (Table 7). Indeed, the uncertain profile gathers 28.6% of the whole sample and is consequently the main profile among the surveyed people. Nevertheless, some recomposed data give us more information about these trends: if we aggregate full and partial *deliberative* profiles, they reach 40% of our sample, whereas full and partial *stealth* profiles only gather 31%. Furthermore, the full *deliberative* profile (21%) is higher than the full *stealth* profile (11.3%): these results partly confirm the Harvard team’s statements about the capacity of the participatory offer to convince people that politics is changing. However, the two full profiles (*deliberative* and *stealth*) only represent a third of the sample; uncertain and partial profiles

are the most widespread opinions. Thus, the knowledge of participatory democracy is not systematically synonymous with a clear favorable perception.

**Table 7: Opinions on participatory democracy (N=542<sup>32</sup>)**

	%
Full <i>deliberative</i> profile	21,0
Partial <i>deliberative</i> profile	19,4
Full <i>stealth</i> profile	11,3
Partial <i>stealth</i> profile	19,7
<i>Uncertain</i> profile	28,6
Total	100

Now that we have described opinions about participatory democracy, we can test various correlations between degree of knowledge and perceptions. Yet, it does not exist significant gap between the different degrees of knowledge (Table 8)<sup>33</sup>. The sense of the correlation is not therefore very clear: indeed, only a very short majority of those who know the offer (50.5 %) have a complete or partial *deliberative* profile. They seem to be more deliberative than those who only know the “theme”, but the proportion of deliberative profile is not overwhelming. However, we observe that those who know the “offer” have a more clear position: they are less *uncertain* (19%) than those who only know the “theme” (30.5%). However, the full and partial *stealth* profiles are very stable from one side of knowledge to another. This stability leads us to argue that the trends described by the Harvard team are only very modestly confirmed. Indeed, to know the existence of a participatory offer seems to support the formation of an opinion (favorable or unfavorable) without leading to a clear dominant opinion. The public participation opportunities do not convert *stealth* individuals into *deliberative* citizens: it only could convince uncertain people.

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<sup>32</sup> Questions about opinion on participatory democracy are only asked to individuals who know participatory democracy (as a theme or an offer). We have also excluded individuals who do not answer to one of these four questions(7 individuals).

<sup>33</sup> Cramer’s V is non-significant.

**Table 8: Knowledge of participatory democracy and opinions profiles (N=542)**

	Offer	Theme	Full sample
Full <i>deliberative</i> profile	24,7%	20,3%	21,0%
Partial <i>deliberative</i> profile	25,8%	18,0%	19,4%
Full <i>stealth</i> profile	11,8%	11,1%	11,3%
Partial <i>stealth</i> profile	18,3%	20,0%	19,7%
<i>Uncertain</i> profile	19,4%	30,5%	28,6%
<i>Total</i>	100%	100%	100%

Admittedly, our survey does not enable us to measure the will to participate in a participatory and/or deliberative experiment. Even, we must notice that no deliberative experiments (mini-publics such as citizen’s conference) were quoted by individuals, even though these experiments belong to the provided list of settings: in other words, only “selected” citizens seem to know the existence of citizen’s juries. It refers to a previously mentioned problem: the “artificiality” of public participation. Can the participatory setting work without technologies of public creation, such as random selection? Indeed, even if it “proves” the opening of political system thanks to the action of facilitators (social scientists and professionals), these settings cannot erase the problem of the evident lack of information and interest of citizens in public participation. Existing public offer does not seem able to set confidence: the most attentive and captive public remains mainly uncertain about their sense and effects. Moreover, let us remind that this uncertain opinion comes from what we called social “oligarchy”: this public is also an attentive observer of the whole political system. Consequently, one can suggest that the opinion about participatory democracy is closely correlated to the opinion on the political system. The real public participatory offer cannot be disconnected from its context of production. Without the scientific mediation of a research team, public participation cannot overwhelm the importance of other democratic stakes, at the less in the French case: lack of political plurality, strong elitism, opacity of decision-making process, weakness of opposition or, at the local scale, confusion between executive and legislative powers (Paoletti 2007). These structural problems of the French democratic system necessarily impact the perceptions of public participation by the population.



#### **4. Conclusion: participatory experiment in debate**

According to our results, public participation, defined as an existing offer of participatory settings and not easy to handle for the needs of a scientific experiment, mainly reinforces the social “oligarchisation” of political life. Only “upper class” public is really aware of participatory democracy, without however supporting it. This result from our survey opens a debate on the concrete effect of democratic reforms set up by political authorities since the beginning of the 2000’s. Indeed, despite the proliferation of participatory settings, such as deliberative mini-publics (see for instance Warren 2008) or participatory budgeting (Aragonès Sánchez-Pagés 2009), these reforms remain ignored by the majority of population and limited to a restricted group of observers, scholars, activists and participants. Of course, we do not deny that dominated publics could favorably answer to a direct invitation to participate: technologies of random selection used in mini-publics, which are very close to random sampling used for polls<sup>34</sup>, always manage to constitute non-aberrant samples, compared to the reality they intend to represent.

However, the participatory settings which do not use such technologies have difficulties to reach the most excluded publics. In fact, the participatory offer can be compared to a classical agenda-setting process, and more precisely an “immersed” type of agenda-setting, according to Pierre Favre (1992): the activism of actors’ coalitions (representatives and bureaucracy) within public institutions, the spread of “good practices”, the rise of a competitive market in participatory services (Nonjon 2006) explain the proliferation of participatory settings, most of the time without any “request” from population. We must remind that the rise of an “offer” without “request” could be observed through Europe: in United Kingdom, Vivien Lowndes, Lawrence Pratchett and Gerry Stoker (2001, p. 212) indicate that one of the main problems of the participatory institutional-settings adopted by the English local authorities is to find the good methods to reach their public, in order to “create” the request for participation.

Consequently, we argue that “stealth democracy” is not a valuable model of democracy (which could be contested by a « deliberative » form) but a fruitful critic that

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<sup>34</sup> In France, pollsters are the main providers of these random selections for mini-publics.

*Guillaume Gourgue, Jessica Sainy, C.WP n°1/2011*

opens a renewed debate about the growing gap between offer and request for public participation. Public participation can be considered as a governmental act, more and more autonomous (from society) and institutionalized, which leans on the construction of a “public problem” of participation. Our survey tried to understand who is the “target audience” of this new policy? In other words, we reversed the status of the “public”: it does not anymore claim for more participation, but it is “created” by participatory settings. This approach reveals that the whole population is not more integrated in current participatory settings than in representative democracy. Moreover, it suggests that a clear refusal to participate from citizens must not be confused with a global theory of democracy: maybe citizens prefer more autonomous, radical and independent forms of participation, maybe they prefer not to invest more themselves in public life.

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### *Annex: Methodology appendix*

The “COGNI” program was led within the IEP of Grenoble since 2006; our results come from the second wave of the survey which was carried out in 2009. It gathers a research team of 10 members. The aim of this survey is to understand the way of individuals think about politics and their abilities to change or maintain their opinion during a discussion - simulated within the survey. Our data were collected in November 2009. Our sample is made up of 1213 individuals, half of whom live in the Rhone-Alps region, and the other half live in other regions<sup>35</sup>. The survey was managed by a specialized institute. Our research team trained the interviewers from the institute in the specificities of our research program. The questionnaire was written by our research team and includes more than 100 questions, for an average duration of 27 minutes.

In addition to the traditional questions about opinions and socio-demographic datas, ours questionnaire was structured by two main issues: political knowledge and the changes of individuals’ opinions. Concerning political knowledge, a “quiz” was designed with questions about knowledge of the French and international political life, with free or assisted answers. The aim of this “quiz” was to measure the “degree” of knowledge of individuals, in order to form a typology, but also to use it as an explanatory variable within the analysis of results. Concerning changes of opinions, a device was especially designed to test the constancy of opinions: it consists in a simulation of debate (in three steps) between the interviewers and the surveyed people. A first question is answered about public issues<sup>36</sup>, in order to know the opinion of the surveyed people. According to his answer, a first counter-argument is provided; then, we ask if the surveyed people change my mind. If he does, we ask him why; if he does not, we propose a second counter-argument. Then, we ask another time if he changes his mind. If he does or if he does not, we ask him why.

Five main assumptions were tested in this questionnaire. The first assumption was that the variables of politicization and the socio-demographic properties highly influence the political argumentation. The second assumption highlights the marginal effects of “context” on the changes of opinion. The third assumption focuses on the influence of the “personality” or “attitude” on the stability of opinions. The fourth assumption argues that political knowledge has a limited impact on the stability of opinions: within debate, any individual can formulate a coherent and argued speech. Lastly, the fifth assumption wants to prove that the quality of public discussions can change people’s mind: only quality arguments are likely to make evolve opinions.

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<sup>35</sup> Our sample is representative of the population in terms of gender, age and education.

<sup>36</sup> Two French public issues stakes were tested during this survey: the European Union integration and the discrimination against young French people with foreign origins.

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Editing Criteria:

Proposed papers must be written in English; in addition to the text, they should include:

- an abstract;
- a very short biographical note on the author;
- a list of references;
- all paper must be between 8.000 to 12.000 words in length (Garamond font, size 12, line spacing 1,5)