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What political discussion means  
and how do the French and (French speaking) Belgians deal with it.

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**Panel: Political Discussion and Political Deliberation in a Comparative Perspective**

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The propensity of citizens to engage in political discussion is classically considered to be a basic component of democratic political systems (Lane, 1961; Almond & Verba, 1963). However, the renewal of academic interest in political discussion over the last two decades has been stimulated by research focused both on political participation and deliberative democracy. In the current debate over the consequences of everyday political discussion on citizens and democracy, the most common way to conduct research is to base it on declarations and find out patterns of causality between, on the one hand, how much citizens say they talk politics and with whom, and on the other hand, respondents’ characteristics (Mutz, 2004; Searing et alii, 2008; Huckfeldt and Mendez, 2008). Other researchers try to find out more precisely what these discussions are really made up of, what they are like, how citizens manage to discuss politics with others. There are different methods to approach this question: asking people to tell us about it (Conover, Searing and Crewe, 2002), observing people discussing politics (Gamson, 1992, Cramer Walsh, 2004), or both (Eliasoph, 1998).

Our contribution belongs to the second category: we conducted focus groups in order to observe how “ordinary” citizens discuss politics<sup>1</sup>. The design of this project differs from others notably because we set up the discussion in such a way that participants knew they were expected to discuss politics, but we then let them free to do it in their own way (or not). We will present and explain the research design in the first section of the paper. Our analysis of how participants did talk politics emphasises two processes: a process that which recalls deliberation, as debated in the framework of deliberative democracy, because it is a cooperative process of opinion building; another process that we call “conflictualisation” (section 2). We will explain how these two processes involve “raw material” of different natures, respectively opinions and cleavages (section 3). What chiefly characterises political discussion among ordinary citizens is the combination of these two processes, which can take different shapes (section 4). In the last and fifth section of this article, we will suggest some hypotheses regarding the influence of different social backgrounds and national contexts on the interweaving of cooperation and conflictualisation in citizens’ political talk.

### ***A public discussion on European integration: how we arranged the “test of politicisation”***

*A priori*, ethnographic observation may seem the most appropriate way to study political discussion. Nina Eliasoph and Katherine Cramer Walsh spent years attending meetings and listening to the way people discuss (or do not discuss) politics either in civic groups (Eliasoph 1998) or in informal groups (Cramer Walsh, 2004). No matter how fruitful and convincing their results may be (we will come back to them later), we consider that ethnography raises two difficulties: first, political discussion is rare and thus one needs to spend a lot of time observing people to collect material which is always scarce; second, if one wants to avoid disturbing the situation, recording is out of the question. Hence, one has to rely on notes to carry out an analysis and these notes are necessarily partial<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> The research project involves other colleagues: Elizabeth Frazer (University of Oxford, New college), André-Paul Frogner (Université catholique de Louvain, SPRI), Guillaume Garcia (Université de Paris-Dauphine et Centre Européen de Sciences Po), Virginie van Ingelgom (Université Catholique de Louvain et Sciences Po Paris). We are very much indebted to them as this research would never have been carried out without their strong commitment to the project. More information about the project on [http://erg.politics.ox.ac.uk/projects/discussion\\_political/index.asp](http://erg.politics.ox.ac.uk/projects/discussion_political/index.asp). We also thank colleagues who commented on earlier versions of this paper, and more particularly Mounia Bennani-Chraïbi, Jean-Gabriel Contamin, Bruno Latour and Laura Morales. We are also very much indebted to Chantal Barry who edited this paper in English.

<sup>2</sup> Katharine Cramer Walsh explains convincingly why she chose not to record the conversations she took part in: she did not want to disturb the situation. Fair enough. She gives a few examples of extracts of discussions taken

Alternatively, observing political discussion can be done by means of focus groups. William Gamson did this in his well-known “Talking Politic” (Gamson, 1992). Let us go briefly through the specific features of our research design, by presenting first, the concrete arrangements of these groups and second, the way we conceived them as a ‘test of politicisation’.

### **Methodological design**

First, like Conover and Searing’s, our design is comparative. This research is based on 24 focus groups on Europe organized in 2005 and 2006 in three cities, Paris, Bruxelles and Oxford<sup>3</sup>. Qualitative comparison is difficult and demanding and more particularly so when one has to deal with the free-flowing and disorganised discourse recorded in focus groups. We compare not only national cases but social backgrounds too. Talking politics in a public setting is not easy and the effect of social differences on the way people discuss issues, and especially on their reluctance to talk, is very strong. We therefore brought together participants who shared roughly the same social background. Four profiles were specified and in each country, two focus groups were organised for each of them. In sum, for each of the three countries, the sample includes: two groups of participants with occupations such as cleaners, drivers, shop assistants and kitchen workers, defined as ‘working class’ for the purposes of this project; two groups with occupations such as office workers, salespersons, health support workers (“white collar”); two groups with university or higher education professionals and jobs such as consultant engineer, office manager, or journalist (“professional-manager”). In addition, in each country we convened two groups of ‘activists’ – individuals active in parties, running for elections, or employed in ‘political’ positions in parties or other relevant organisations. At this stage of the analysis, we will focus on the comparison of one group from each category for the French and (French speaking) Belgian cases only, so eight groups in total.

Participants had to be citizens of the relevant country, but covered a wide range of geographical origins and ages. As mentioned above, the groups are more or less socially homogeneous (that is to say, with similar kinds of education and occupation) but, of course, this socio-professional homogeneity turned out to be relative; the groups were heterogeneous

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from her notes and transcribed from tape recordings and seems to conclude that there is scarcely any difference. We find on the contrary that there are important differences in the example she displays. Her notes account for the main argument, for what is stressed most vigorously by the speaker but leaves out apparently secondary details.

<sup>3</sup> For an extensive presentation of the recruitment process and composition of the groups, see Garcia & Van Ingelgom 2008.

according to other criteria such as age, gender or ethnic origin, amongst others. Regarding political homogeneity, the groups were deliberately constituted to include participants with various political orientations (measured by political party preference, the way they voted in the last general election and attitudes towards European integration). Moreover, unlike Gamson and many users of focus groups in social research (Gamson, 1992, Perrin 2006, Bloor & alii, 2001, p.22-24), we did not include members of pre-existing groups. The discussion occurred in a public setting (the discussion was video recorded and organised in an official building: university or research centre) and was potentially controversial: the people who took part in the focus group discussions did not know about the others' opinions and would discover in the course of the discussion that they were sometimes in disagreement with them.

Participants met for an extended period (three hours including refreshment and socialisation). What chiefly characterizes our focus groups is the method we have developed to facilitate discussions<sup>4</sup>. Facilitation consists in recording participants' views on flipcharts as they are being expressed, so that the group can reflect upon and react to them. The crucial characteristic of this method is that it encourages people to express dissent. The facilitator expressly invites reactions from participants', urging them to express any form of hesitation about what is being written on the board – be it incomprehension, a desire for a change in wording, or to be more precise, and above all, disagreement<sup>5</sup>. Moreover, although the discussion was framed by five carefully tested questions (regarding Europe: what 'being European' means, the power structure of Europe, opinions about Turkey's possible entry into the EU, as well as knowledge of the attitudes of the country's major political parties to Turkey's entry), we let the participants free to address them as they wanted, and did not refocus. We wanted to see how they would handle a situation that we knew was anything but natural.

### **The 'test of politicisation'**

Our design is artificial and deliberately so. We put the participants in a situation that can be qualified as a "test of politicisation". In many respects, politics is a specific and even specialized world and politicization can be understood as a process of infringement of the political order, when ordinary citizens become involved in political affairs (Rancière, 1995;

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<sup>4</sup> Our facilitation method was adapted from that developed by Metaplan®, a German/French consultancy.

<sup>5</sup> For more details about the methodology, see Duchesne & Haegel 2007

Lagroye, 2003). We deliberately put participants in such a situation. They were selected after having answered two questionnaires<sup>6</sup> which included obvious political questions. We did not tell them the topic of discussion beforehand. Nevertheless before the session began, some participants made it clear that they were anxious at the idea that they would have to talk about politics. The topic itself – Europe – is heavily discussed in the political arena, and surveys show that it is not a familiar topic for most French and (French speaking) Belgians. During the break as well as at the end of the discussion, they expressed worries about the situation and, especially, about the political feature of the discussion. Were they doing well? They felt they did not know enough. Were they expected/allowed to disagree with each other? What had this discussion been organized for? It was clear then that most participants would not have spontaneously engaged in such a public discussion on Europe with strangers. But they had committed themselves to it<sup>7</sup>, so they handled it. We observed how they coped with the situation; how they managed to discuss politically labelled topics that are partly out of the reach of their daily life; moreover, how they did it in a public setting. We also observed how they escaped from or reversed the test.

The first tactic they could use to do this was to avoid it. The obvious way to exit was simply to keep silent and some participants hardly spoke, especially women, younger, (comparatively) less educated or ethnic minority participants, as the effect of social inequalities on the ability to talk remains very strong (see Mansbridge 1983, Sanders 1997, Mendelberg 2002). Another way to sidestep the situation was to refuse the discussion because of a lack of knowledge. This did not happen very much in the Paris and Brussels groups<sup>8</sup>. The third avoidance strategy used was: talking aside. Talking aside was sometimes caused by the heat of the discussion, especially in the French groups, but not always. As moderators, we used the fact that we were recording as an argument against it. Some participants, when asked to repeat aloud what they been discussing aside, made it clear they did not want to. Lastly, participants could digress from the topic imposed or avoid discussing **public matter**. Indeed, the French quite often wandered off Europe but their discussions nevertheless addressed fundamental issues regarding the current state and transformation of French society, public policies, the world

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<sup>6</sup> A first very brief questionnaire used for the selection process, and a second one, once a participant was confirmed, before the discussion, with more detailed information, notably on political opinions.

<sup>7</sup> They were expecting a reward – 50€ / £40 – for it, which was the obvious incentive for working class and white collar participants. For professionals- managers, the money was less attractive and indeed we found it more difficult to hire them. Their incentive was rather to take part in a research project conducted by a major university.

<sup>8</sup> But it did happen massively in Oxford groups.

economy and the distribution of power. Altogether, all French and (French speaking) Belgian groups played the game and passed the ‘test’; but they did it in different ways.

Let us mention two characteristics of our analysis before we give some insights on how politicisation of the discussion occurred in these groups. First, we were not dealing with individuals in that we were not trying to explain the involvement of specific participants within the discussion<sup>9</sup> (either in terms of dispositions or consequences). We are interested in the dynamic of the discussion itself; hence we focus on interaction. Second, academic research on political discussion, especially in the last two decades, is deeply loaded with normative expectations regarding the contribution of everyday political discussion in democracy. Our perspective is more analytic. What we chiefly want to understand is how the dynamic of talking politics as a way of addressing the complexity of the political in different democracies works.

### ***Cooperative and conflictive processes at work in discussion***

Although the renewed interest in everyday political discussion has been heavily influenced by debate on deliberative democracy, recent work emphasizes more particularly the expressive nature of citizens’ political discussion. We follow on this by clarifying the two processes at work in our focus groups’ dynamic: a cooperative process that resembles deliberation partly because it implies tolerance and openness; and a conflictive process where people not only express themselves but also take sides.

### **State of the art: everyday political talk between argumentation and expression**

The so-called “deliberative turn” has largely contributed to a renewal of interest in everyday political discussion in a normative way. Mostly focused on the institutional setting that favours “good” deliberation, scholars have studied deliberation in Parliament and in local communities. They have tried to elaborate indicators in order to gauge and compare the quality of deliberation (Steenberg and alii, 2003). In the meantime, Habermas’s theory and its supporters have been subject to criticism which contests his model because of its empirical as well as theoretical irrelevance. The critics argue that deliberation does not fit with the “real world” because it tends to exclude a lot of people. Far from being inclusive, deliberation leaves aside a lot of individuals and groups because of their lack of knowledge and the

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<sup>9</sup> « The social sciences in general have not typically focused on social interaction, favoring the more manageable task of looking at individuals’ characteristics and activities or the institutional and static feature of groups. These are relevant to the empirical investigation of deliberation but do not directly address the inter-subjective/interactive quality of what transpires in deliberation.” (Rosenberg 2005, p.218).

inadequacy of their mode of communication which is more emotional than rational, in relation to the deliberative norms (Sanders, 1997; Young, 2000). Moreover, critics argue that the deliberative model misunderstands what politics indeed is, i.e. antagonism (Mouffe, 1993), interest and power (Shapiro, 1999) and ideological domination (Prezeworski 1998). This debate calls for empirical research that would take both deliberation and what is not deliberation into account.

Compared to the cumulative attempt to select criteria to judge deliberation, the lack of a systematic elaboration of analytical criteria in order to analyze what is “not deliberative” in political discussion is striking. The distinction introduced by Elster (Elster 1992) between “arguing” and “bargaining” takes up this challenge and has been empirically tested by Holzinger (Holzinger 2005). Working on parliamentary debates, she has given evidence that “arguing” and “bargaining” can appear together and are not alternative modes of communication. But this finding concerns local communities and parliamentary debates and it is likely that the point of view is slightly different when one wants to study “everyday talk”, as everyday talk “is not necessarily aimed at any action other than talk itself” and can be “purely expressive” (Mansbridge 1999: 212). Indeed, everyday talk is less concerned by arguing or bargaining than by understanding others or expressing oneself. If one major question is “How much deliberation is there in a real world?” (Bächtiger, Steiner 2005: 156), one has to observe how in the “real world” of ordinary citizens people discuss this, how they deal with deliberative expectations, what do they do when they discuss something and do not deliberate.

In this respect, in some countries, we now know quite well when, where and with whom citizens discuss matters that may be dealt with in a political way (Huckfeldt & alii, 2004; Mutz, 2006; Zuckerman, 2004). Depending on the authors and their methodology, the assessment is more or less restrictive but we know that political discussion is limited, more limited than required by democratic ideals. Various scholars underline different processes which explain why citizens avoid talking politics, especially with strangers (Eliasoph, 1998, Conover & alii, 2002, Cramer Walsh 2004, Hamidi, 2006). One key factor which is favourable to political discussion is when there is a degree of acquaintance and expectation of convergence of opinions. According to Diana Mutz (Mutz, 2006), political discussion varies depending on the type of network in which it takes place. Social and/or political heterogeneous networks seem to encourage political tolerance and openness but they discourage political participation [including political discussion], conversely social/political homogenous networks reinforce strong opinion and political involvement but hinder tolerance. Mutz considers this to be a



consequence of the “tension between two impulses – the desire to get along peacefully with one’s fellow human beings and the desire to maintain one’s independence of perspective (...)” (Mutz, 2006, p.149) -. She infers this from her survey results<sup>10</sup>.

Katharine Cramer Walsh, on the contrary, observed the way citizens discuss politics in ordinary life<sup>11</sup>. She concludes that people only marginally exchange information about the political realm, and shows that “the fundamental politically relevant act is the communication of information about the kind of people individuals perceive themselves to be and the collective envisioning of group and community boundaries” (Cramer Walsh 2004, 42). Using various methodologies, Conover and Searing reach a similar conclusion: political discussion in everyday life mixes a narrative function that serves to reveal individual and group identity, with a rhetorical function (Conover & Searing, 2005, p.279). Hence, deliberation, or whatever resembles it, is only one aspect of political discussion in everyday life.

Our analysis of the way French and (French speaking) Belgians passed the test of politicisation and discussed European integration follows a similar direction. As public meetings of strangers holding politically opposing views, our focus groups correspond quite closely to a situation that the promoters of deliberative democracy wish to see more of as they reckon this would theoretically produce “encounters with multiple viewpoints, and motivations to produce public reasons” (Searing et alii, 2007) Of course, we have no idea how often this actually happens in real life, how often people get to establish afresh a political relationship by talking with people they don’t know. What we wanted to do was simply to observe what happens when such a situation occurs. Because it is artificial, our methodological design, is similar to a magnifying glass and allows us to stimulate, observe, record and finally analyse all the clues to what talking politics means. We will use these groups to refine the analysis of the two aspects of political discussion among citizens which most authors have so far considered deliberative and expressive, and which we suggest instead apprehending thanks to a cooperative / conflictive dichotomy.

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<sup>10</sup> Although she refers frequently to her own personal experience.

<sup>11</sup> William Gamson and Nina Eliasoph did too, but they compare what people do when discussing politics with an ex ante definition of what talking politics is. Gamson, who is mainly interested in the potential of citizens’ for political mobilisation, shows that working class people can discuss politics if induced to and analyses the kind of resources they use; while Eliasoph shows that, in ordinary life, at least in civic groups, people avoid “public spirited” discussion.

## Conflictualisation and cooperation: two processes

When we first tested our methodology in France, a couple of years ago, we ended up with quite highly conflictive and emotionally loaded moments of discussions. As suggested by specialists of the analysis of focus groups who recommend paying special attention to “sensitive moments” (Kitzinger , Farquhar 1999) we focused the analysis on these moments of conflict. We thus showed how the dynamic of the political discussions we had observed relies on the way participants avoid or accept conflict (Duchesne, Haegel 2007). But we then wondered if this approach to politicisation through conflict was not partly ethnocentrism, that is, was not partly due to the fact that we were watching the *French* talking politics. We therefore followed up with the comparative research project presented in this chapter.

Indeed, when we organised groups in Brussels, the discussions recorded sounded really quite different. The general atmosphere and more specifically, the basic way participants engaged in the discussions seemed less conflictive, more cooperative and open. Once we began to look in detail at the dynamic of the recorded discussions (videos and transcripts) however, we observed that differences were less considerable that we had believed at first sight. We then decided that instead of focussing on sensitive moments, we would analyse the whole discussion. We thus noticed highly conflictive moments in the (French speaking) Belgian groups; reciprocally, we established that the French discussions could not be summed up by conflict avoidance and acceptance. We realised that in order to fully account for the dynamic of the 24 hours (8X3) of public discussion on a political issue that we had analysed so far, we needed two processes, which we will name cooperation and conflictualisation. The first partly meets the requirement of deliberative democracy – but partly only; the second covers up the expression of identity – but we feel it does more than that. Cooperative and conflictive processes, which are empirical constructions, differ in two respects: they involve neither the same type of interaction nor the same type of resources (Table 1).

**Table 1. Cooperative and conflictive processes**

	Cooperative process: exchange of opinions	Conflictive process: Taking a stand on cleavages
Interaction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Make sure everyone has a say</li> <li>- Different opinions are acknowledged</li> <li>- Trying to understand others’ opinions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Domination of some speakers</li> <li>- Making of alliances</li> <li>- Tendency to interpret others’ positions</li> </ul>
Resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Ability to put things into perspective</li> <li>- Opinions related to facts and knowledge (information)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Tendency to generalize, dichotomise and advertise one’s position</li> <li>- Position related to personal experience</li> </ul>

Many scholars have figured out how discussion can reach deliberation, and doing so, have tried to select a list of criteria that can assess the “deliberative quality” of various discourses (Gastil 1993, Mendleberg 2002, Steenberg et alii 2003). Following Habermas, they systematically emphasize the same criteria: deliberation is a matter of specific interactions based on equality, respect and cooperation; and it is a matter of extensive justification based on rational arguments and the common good. Cooperation resembles deliberation because of the kind of interactions that contribute to it, but the type of resources and arguments that go with it does not meet the expectation of deliberative democracy.

Cooperation supposes inclusion and can be identified by a balanced distribution of speech turns, the “relative frequency and length with which different individuals speak, the manner in which their contributions are taken up by others and the effect they have on the course of the conversation and collective decision making” (Rosenberg 2005: 217). It corresponds to a fluid circulation of speech: nobody tries to impose their position and dominate others; the participants obviously want to cooperate and try to elaborate a common argument. They pay attention to each other, and if someone remains silent, the others will ask them how they feel. The following quotes denote cooperation: “It’s not my question, but it’s a good one”; “I accept to discuss this point”; “It’s debatable”. These comments indicate that the discussion is valued for itself and that the positions are not fixed.

Conversely, conflictive sequences are primarily concerned with domination and the making of alliances. In this process, discussing is far from being a mere “cooperative game” (Goodin 2005) as it sounds more like a struggle between adversaries. In public discussion, the general rule, framed by social norms, is that people avoid conflict. But the dynamic of political discussion is such that participants in our groups do not always remain silent when others express views that they identify or interpret as being hostile to their own position. We observe that speaking one’s mind and taking the risk of conflict generally implies seeking allies (Duchesne & Haegel, 2007). Allies are mainly found inside the group but can be brought in from outside. In this case, the odds are that the conflict is institutionalised, ideologically shaped and supported by political groups. For instance, in the French executives group, Fabienne, a communist supporter, was able to provoke and deal with her isolation as she could rely on external allies<sup>12</sup>. When the process of conflictualisation dominates the discussion, at least two participants speak much longer than the others and try to impose their

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<sup>12</sup> In this case, “bringing in her allies from the outside” is hardly metaphorical as she ended up the session texting people with her mobile phone. The recording of the expressions on her face suggest that these messages are related to the discussion.

views on them. They express themselves in turn without taking former arguments into account. They tend to talk towards the animator and to introduce arguments unrelated to what was said before. They pile up unconnected statements, seeming mainly concerned by the accurate expression and promotion of their position. When they actually answer someone, it is either to invalidate that person's opinion ("That's not the question" for instance is a basic way to devalue the others' argument) or to enlist them on their side by interpreting their argument as supportive.

Cooperative and conflictive processes differ strongly in terms of interaction, in such a way that the former recalls deliberation while the latter incorporates a strong expressive dimension. But the similarity between cooperation and deliberation ends in our analysis of resources and arguments. In line with Habermas, many scholars have considered that deliberation supposes a sense of common good, an appeal to the principle of universalism (Steenberg and alii, 2003) and the strength of rationality. From this perspective, deliberation goes together with generalization. The cooperative process on the contrary, is fuelled by the participants' desire and ability to put things into perspective. Putting things into perspective supposes taking the complexity of an issue and the variety of situations where the issue is relevant into account – hence assessing the specificity of various sectors and scales. Participants then argue that their judgement depends on the situation which of course varies. For example, unification of rules at the European level might be considered desirable regarding environmental issues but not education. Discussion about the unfairness of the higher education system is put into perspective with the situation 30 years ago. Problems regarding the place of immigrants in society is fuelled by a comparison between the French and the German cases. Thus the participants will agree (more or less implicitly) that their opinion and maybe their preference regarding possible change or political decision can vary according to the sector, the place, the scale, the rate, or even the time. As a consequence, a common opinion can be constructed or at least, if the disagreement persists, the debate remains open. In other words, the potential compromise depends on the acknowledgment both of the complexity of the world and the incremental process of all decisions. This ability to put things into perspective is marked by the following expressions: "telecommunication and education are two different sectors", "everything is relative", "it depends on the percentage", "it depends on the schedule" or "it's too early, we need time", "I agree with you on specific conditions" etc.

Conversely, the process of conflictualisation neglects the complexity of historical and geographical situations, of policy implementation and social change. The general statement is considered valid for everybody, everywhere and every time. It is based mostly on value

judgements and framed in terms of absolute (and often moral) assessment. The following illustrations are selected from the French groups: “Everywhere in all countries, you can find rich and poor people”; ‘it is today’s world, an awful world”, “corruption is everywhere” or “problems in education have always occurred”. Generalization leads both to simplification and conflictualisation of the discussion. Statements are meant to be convincing and compelling as a matter of principle. This leads participants to express preferences referring to values that are experienced by the discussants as antagonistic.

### *Opinions and cleavages*

Different modes of interaction, different types of resources: the two processes that account for the different ways our participants passed the test of politicisation are indeed two different ways of engaging in the discussion. The raw material on which the two processes are based is different: on the one hand, participants exchange *opinions*, on the other hand, they confront their positions which is what we will call a *cleavage*. Opinions are evaluations that depend first of all on what participants know, what they have heard, seen, read, or been told about the topic. They are debatable in so far as nobody ever knows everything, especially when the topic is as far from people’s daily lives and complex as European integration<sup>13</sup>. “Cleavages” are divisions which suppose not only personal involvement but also social identification. They are not really debatable because most of the time they refer to what you are and not to what you think.

The question about Turkey’s entry into the EU is particularly appropriate to illustrate the role played by opinions and cleavages in the discussions<sup>14</sup>. Participants’ opinions were mostly based on what usually looked like a factual discussion: is Turkey democratic? Does it respect human rights? Are women considered equal to men there? Is Turkey a religious or non-religious State? Disagreement occurs, but it involves first of all what participants think they know. As they do not, of course, provide sources of information that would allow for verification, the question remains open, unless one participant succeeds in convincing the

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<sup>13</sup> However, any political topic would be the same: pensions, unemployment, corruption, elections or education, any of these topics, even if they seem closer to everyday life, call for extensive knowledge. The preliminary test we made with French people speaking about delinquency shows that the choice of Europe as a topic has no consequence in this respect.

<sup>14</sup> This question was the second one of the second part of the session. First of all, participants were asked to vote publicly, for or against Turkey’s entry in the European Union, knowing that after the vote, there would be a discussion about it. Then the moderator would call for arguments corresponding to the minority vote and write them up; then for the majority – although the discussion being free, most of these arguments were usually mentioned before. This question allows us to watch out for opinion change which is a key element in the discussion on deliberation. See the appendix for a brief summary of the way this question was handled in each group.

others that he/she is more knowledgeable than they are. But the discussion on Turkish entry into the EU is not merely a question of opinions on Turkey; involvement in the debate can entail choosing a side. Thus, being for or against Turkish entry becomes a way to support the South or ethnic minorities; being against, a way to support women's rights etc.

For instance, in the Brussels group of working class participants, the "cleavage" raised by the Turkish issue remains latent. It could have opposed those who contest an EU made of "blond people with blue eyes" as Ali puts it because of his and others' ethnic origins (Ali, Saïd and Sidi are from the Maghreb and Justine is from the Congo). But the discussion does not take this path: it focuses on the point of whether Turkey is democratic or not. It is then no longer a question of preference or principle (all consider themselves to be democrats) but of opinions on the Turkish political situation. The participants tend to put aside their personal identifications as Muslims and ethnic minorities or not, and exchange opinions and information in order to assess or contest the validity of their evaluation of Turkish democracy. In order to do this, **common knowledge is the resource most often drawn on** and the **information they provide is assertion rather than anything else**. Participants mention facts and do not explain how they know them; knowledge is taken for granted, possibly discussed or completed by other participants, as is the case when one suggests putting it into perspective, by comparing it with other situations<sup>15</sup>. Ali and Saïd argue that Turkey is actually a democracy with a Parliament and an elected President. Marco and Rose emphasize the fact that even though the formal democratic rules are respected, Human Rights are overridden. By way of example they refer to jails, women's rights etc. The two others argue that French jails or Guantanamo are not better and have been condemned by international NGOs, or that Turkish women obtained the right to vote before Belgian women, etc.

In the Paris white collar group, which includes four women and two men, all between 21 and 38 years old, the discussion of the the debate surrounding the vote on Turkey's entry is totally different. Laetitia and Clélia, two young women of unidentifiable origin, express a strong refusal of Turkey's entry because they believe women there are considered inferior. They refuse to discuss what Turkey actually looks like nowadays and pursue telling the others how they feel when they see women in Parisian suburbs wearing the full black **hijab**.

**Laetitia (à Clélia)** : Hum moi je l'ai vue en France elle était accompagnée par son copain qui lui tenait le bras et qui la guidait comme si elle était aveugle parce que

**Clélia** : j'en vois tous les jours (*bafouille*) mais :

**Laetitia** : moi ça je suis désolée mais ça me tue trop, moi ça me tue

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<sup>15</sup> In other circumstances, knowledge is said to come from school learning, reading, something that has been heard somewhere or in the news, especially on TV. Then the point gains authority but might still be challenged – with suspicion expressed against media power for instance - or followed up.

**Patrice** (*vers Laetitia*) (*se tourne vers tableau*) je trouve que...

**Clélia** = ah moi je pff : (*bafouille, approuve Laetitia*)

**Patrice** : pour l'instant, on devrait avoir du mal à juger

**Laetitia** (*à Clélia*) : Moi j'ai rien voulu dire à la nana enfin, je sais pas quoi lui dire

**Hadia** (*à Laetitia*) : mais pourquoi elles se sauvent pas ?

**Patrice** : parce que en fait on : on sait pas ce qui se passe là bas : (*à Florence*) on a pas une

**Laetitia** : [mais parce qu'elles ont... tu veux qu'elles fassent quoi ?

Their attitude towards Turkey is justified by reference to everyday life experiences (Women they have encountered), feelings (they were shocked) and identifications (they wonder what they should have said, what these women could have done). This use of personal elements, which can be shaped in biographical features, testimonies or narratives, is not so frequent in the discussions: when making private elements of their personal life and experience public participants lay themselves open to judgement. It then becomes more engaging for the others to contest their point without seeming to doubt disclosed memories or to make fun of the person. It even becomes complicated to ask for explanations and details as this may be considered indiscrete. Personal experience is accompanied by an eruption of **strong feelings** and gives the conversation an emotional tone. Clearly, the introduction of an argument based on one's personal experience jeopardizes cooperation. The risk of conflict depends upon what is exchanged. When disclosing their experience, participants tell the others not only their story, but the story of their people, of people like them. At this point, the discussion no longer deals with mere opinions but more heavily with identifications. Compromise becomes barely conceivable because what is at stake is no longer what they think but who they are.

By emphasizing that talking politics **implies drawing on the social experience and identification of people**, we confirm the point made by Cramer Walsh who suggests that political discussion is a matter of "perspective" that depends on social location, experience and identity (Cramer Walsh, 2004: 18-33)<sup>16</sup>. **Our research points out that this** does not only happen in a context where people know each other within a common social network. When it happens among strangers, "perspectives" are more often confronted than shared. Participants may even be forced by others to take sides: in this case, Laetitia challenges the very sceptical men in the group by telling them that even men should be shocked by the awful conditions in which Muslim women live

However, the notion of "cleavage" seems more relevant to us than that of "perspective". This is because the heart of the conflictive process is less the disclosure of one's social belonging

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<sup>16</sup> We leave open the question if and how the cooperative process occurs in discussion among pre-existing homogeneous social groups, the kind that Cramer Walsh observed. We reckon that it does, but she did not pay attention to it partly because she could not record the discussions. Cooperation is less sensitive than conflict and this not something that would be more difficult to remember.

than the way this social belonging contributes to a politically structured antagonism. In the Paris white collar group, the conflict erupts not only because of gender affirmation, but because it is intertwined with a rejection of Islam. This complex connection between feminist demand, French “laïcité” (secularism) and Islamophobia was politically structured, in particular during the so called “headscarf affair” (*l’affaire du voile*) of which lasted for 15 years and resulted in a law forbidding it in schools in 2004 (Duchesne, 2005). **This conflict** exemplifies how participants do not only confront their identification in the process of expressing themselves. Disclosing who they are does not happen at random: it takes place when cleavages are at stake, that is, when the topics under discussion contain (a small number of) basic political antagonisms<sup>17</sup>, that may be considered cleavages in the Rokkanian sense (Haegel, 2005). At the macro level, they connect tightly with long term social changes; at the micro level, they connect with social group identifications and individual experiences.

In the process of conflictualization, ideological stands are no longer a matter of “opinions” but become a matter of personal commitment embedded in personal and family histories. To conclude this point on opinions and cleavages, we would like to raise the issue of changes in opinion. Many authors consider that changing opinion is part of the deliberative process. Theoretically, deliberation implies that people can change their minds merely by the strength of an argument. But, according to our data, changes are not the prerogative of a cooperative exchange of opinions. The explosion of cleavages can and often do impact the stance taken by participants in the discussion: they tend to force the more hesitant or ambiguous participants to choose a side; moreover, as the terms of the debate become more simplified, people may be led to consider or realise they took the wrong side. For instance, in the two groups previously mentioned, both arguments on opinions and the expression of cleavages lead to changes in individual stances. In the (French speaking) Belgian working class group Marco and Rose react positively to the arguments of Ali and Saïd even if they remain slightly dubious. They change to a more moderate position and agree that if Turkey cannot yet enter the EU, it will soon be able to do so. In the French white collar group, Hadia, who voted for Turkey’s entry, ends up supporting their rejection<sup>18</sup>. Conversely, Fabrice, who voted against, changes his mind and makes it clear he would now be in favour of Turkey’s entry. This is because he realises that Clélia and Laetitia have led them all to make a decision based solely on the

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<sup>17</sup> Basically, they oppose authoritarian versus permissive; republican-universalism (or common culture in the French speaking Belgian case) versus multi-culturalist-communitarian, free-market economy versus state intervention. (Duchesne & Haegel 2007)

<sup>18</sup> She soon seems to regret her alliance when she hears more of Clelia’s rightist and xenophobic positions in the next section of the discussion.



criteria of relationships between men and women and refuse to acknowledge, that inequality between men and women is not limited to Muslim countries in spite of examples to the contrary suggested by Fabrice,.

### ***Two processes combined in the dynamic of political discussion***

Although they seem to be opposites on any dimension (interaction, resources, arguments and content), cooperative and conflictive processes are not at all exclusive of each other. They clearly complement each other in political discussion. The combination of the two of them often resembles a close intertwining; in some cases, the two processes follow each other sequentially.

An example of the intertwining of the two processes can be taken from the French white collar group we discussed above. The sequence takes place in the first half hour of the discussion, when they try to answer the question “what does it mean to be European?” They have already quickly addressed a lot of issues – common culture or not, empowerment, peace, solidarity, poverty, comparison with the US – when Magali introduces the idea that it would have been better to connect with the poorest countries instead of building an alliance of rich ones.

**Patrice** : the original idea was to be, to become powerful and (*pause*)

**Laetitia** (*to Patrice*): but I think we already help the poorest countries because, we write off their debts, we, we erase their debts, all the same we erase quite a lot of things so, so in this regard this *is* helping them all the same (*pause*)

**Patrice** (*to Laetitia*): we’re also increasing ours,

**Laetitia** (*immediately*): What did you say ?

**Patrice** (*immediately*): we’re also increasing ours (*he is smiling*)

**Moderator**: so....

**Hadia** (*interrupts the moderator, to Laetitia*): Yeah well, we erase their debts after having colonised them for years, it’s easy to (do), if you see what I mean?

**Laetitia** (*right away*): yeah, well no, I mean I wasn’t saying (*gesture of “what I say doesn’t matter”*)

**Hadia** (*right away, in front of her*): after we can

**Laetitia** (*to Hadia, interrupting her*): it’s a way to help them too after all (*pause*)

**Victor** (*to Laetitia*): Actually... (*he stops and turns towards Patrice who had started speaking at the same time*)

**Patrice** (*to Laetitia*): Those, they are the ones who are more or less, outside Europe, aren’t they

**Clelia** (*right away, to Patrice*): Right no, now we’re getting carried away (*gesture indicating distance*)

**Patrice** (*right away, to Clelia*): Yeah, right, we’re not going to (*hesitates*) I think, I don’t remember our having colonised many countries that are part of Europe today

**Hadia** (*right away, to Patrice*): No I didn’t mean Northern countries, countries...

**Patrice** (*speaking at the same time as Hadia*): ok, we do invade them a little bit, it’s true, but (*smiling*)

**Hadia** (*continues*): Southern countries that are, that are, Africa we talked about (*she looks at Magali then Patrice*): countries that

**Patrice** (*speaking again at the same time as her*): yeah but they’re they’re that’s outside

**Hadia** (*right away*): yeah they are outside because we (*she points at the board*) someone addressed this question before (*looks at the others, Patrice nods*) of, the aim to (**Clelia** *interrupts, she whispers “to bring together”*) to bring together all the poorest countries and so on in order to, so that they could join the EU. You meant Africa, things like that? (*to Magali*)

**Magali** (*in front of her*): yeah... (*very low*)

**Hadia** (*to Magali*): em. And...

**Magali** (*in front of her, continues*): Well to me the humanitarian goal, of solidarity is more important than the goal of becoming, more powerful than the US and all. (*Silence. Hadia flattens her hair and seems to smile, towards Magali and Laetitia*)

In this sequence, cooperation is quite high<sup>19</sup>. All participants intervene, the flow of the discussion is smooth, they do interrupt each other sometimes but they do not speak at the same time, nor do they prevent each other from expressing themselves. They look at each other; each line is a response to the former one. When Patrice misunderstands Hadia about former colonies, she gets the chance to explain. And they refer to what had been said before – Hadia pointing at the board and waiting for Magali to come back to what she said before – indicating that they do pay attention to the arguments exchanged. So altogether, the discussion looks open.

But there are also elements of conflictualisation at stake in the way they keep generalizing about things. They oppose the North and the South, “we” against the poorest countries, the EU and the outside, and never differentiate between countries inside these groups. More important, they oppose two principles: power and solidarity between rich and poor. The final blow is stricken by Magali, encouraged by Hadia, when she introduces a hierarchy between the two. Faced with such a choice, the others can do nothing but keep quiet or take a stand in favour of or against her expressed preference.

Indeed, the opposition between humanitarian and utilitarian principles remain active during the whole session. Magali strengthens it by disclosing that she was homeless for a while and is still doing precarious jobs. Hadia backs Magali up on this, but their understanding is refrained by Magali’s stand against the Welfare State<sup>20</sup>, that Hadia ends up supporting almost on her own (Victor seems rather in favour of it too but remains very much silent). This unachieved alliance is quite a common pattern in the discussions and forms the framework of a general intertwining between cooperation and conflictualisation.

A sequence taken from the (French speaking) Belgian group of managers illustrates the other configuration, when the conflictive process explodes in a discussion which previously proceeded in a cooperative way. The group includes six participants: Roger, 59 a communications manager, Jean-François 29, the manager of an association, Franck, 40, a restaurant owner, Alban, 28, in charge of the security of a nuclear company, Claire, 51, a doctor, Valérie, 45, a journalist. For the larger part of the discussion, the six participants avoid

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<sup>19</sup> Again, these discussions proceed far from what is considered the ideal for deliberation as for instance would happen in representative bodies (Manin, 1987)

<sup>20</sup> This attitude also seems related to a demonstrative show of support for Sarkozy that obviously disconcerts Hadia. We cannot, in the scope of this paper, develop the effects of references to political actors and events in the discussion, although this constitutes a third process at work in the politicisation of these discussions.

conflict even though there are obvious disagreements: between Valérie, strongly pro-European, and Claire who is less enthusiastic; between Alban, in favour of the free-market, and the others; or between Jean-François and Franck, who is more open to multiculturalism than the others. Five out of six vote against Turkey's entry into the EU but when they are asked to provide arguments in favour of Turkish entry, they all play the game. They emphasize the fact that Turkey could progress economically and politically after joining the EU, they support Franck who cautiously explains (he admits he hadn't thought about the issue before) his vote in favour of Turkey's entry on the grounds that Europe should be multicultural. Even though the large majority voted against, they try to think together about what the European borders should be: is it better to include Algeria because of its links to France rather than Turkey? What about Cyprus, Bosnia? What are the alternative scenarios and the right schedule? What is the Turkish perspective? Throughout this sequence, they cooperate, answering each other, trying to elaborate a common stance as the following shows:

**Valérie** : je trouve que l'argument c'est que ni l'Union européenne ni la Turquie ne sont prêtes. Aucune des deux. Bon l'Union européenne elle vient de s'agrandir elle va ...

**Claire** : non

**Valérie** : encore s'agrandir et bon il faut que tout le monde, les nouveaux membres soient vraiment en harmonie avec le reste, qu'on sache exactement ce qu'on veut faire, qu'on réforme les décisions. Bon donc l'Union européenne n'est pas prête

**Roger** : Donc ils ne le sont pas encore

**Valérie** : du tout parce que la Turquie c'est un gros morceau hein c'est pas la Roumanie ou je ne sais pas quoi bon et la Turquie bon elle doit encore sérieusement améliorer sa démocratie

**Claire** : ses problèmes de ...

**Roger** : (à Valérie) ça veut dire que à terme elle pourrait rentrer ?

**Valérie** : pour moi à terme c'est possible.

**Roger** : parce que la question c'est pour ou contre mais est-ce que c'est définitif ça

**Franck** : moi quand je dis pour c'est : c'est pas demain non plus c'est au terme d'un processus; ce sera en 2015 ce sera en 2015 mais...

**Claire** : Moi je préfère qu'on ait des : une position où on est pas dans l'Europe mais on est des pays satellites de l'Europe on est pas : on a pas toute la structure la grosse machine européenne mais qu'on est pays satellite et qu'on a des rapports préférentiels avec des pays comme ça pour tel ou tel domaine

**Roger** : ouais on voit mal quand même on souhaite une démocratisation de la Turquie, une émancipation des femmes et que sais-je encore et puis leurs dire niet vous entrez pas dans l'Europe ça c'est contradictoire

The conflict erupts when Roger mentions very carefully (he specified that this point is debatable) that Islam hardly fits in with democracy. Jean-François reacts immediately claiming that this remark sounds racist. This reaction leads to Roger's strong denial which launches a long-lasting and passionate debate on religion. Roger advocates against any religion, and Valerie, backed up by Claire, speaks in defence of religion. The following quotation illustrates, among many others, the fact that conflictualisation proceeds by assertive statements, exclamations, denials, generalization. Participants who become involved in conflict attempt to talk down what is said by denigrating who said it and referring their controversial opinion to their personal features.

**Roger** : oui mais le fait que par exemple les gens admettent l'interruption volontaire de grossesse, c'est en fonction aussi d'une autre idée de la personne humaine, dire que l'embryon n'est pas encore une personne humaine ça nécessite une définition de la personne humaine. On n'est pas d'accord là-dessus. C'est parce que vous vous posez ça comme un absolu voilà : « le Catholicisme a apporté le respect de la personne humaine », mais sur ce que c'est que la personne humaine, on n'est pas d'accord !

**Valérie** = ah non! Non ! ça c'est tout à fait différent ! ça c'est tout à fait différent !

**Roger** : ah

**Claire** : oui

**Roger** = mais ça ne suffit pas de dire que le Catholicisme a favorisé la démocratie, ça c'est pas vrai !

**Valérie** : Ah non mais pas du tout, mais pas du tout...

**Claire** : ah non! Non ! Non !

**Roger** : de même que l'Islam est contre la démocratie

**Valérie** : bon il faut aussi voir l'évolution des religions

**Roger** : ah oui, oui à partir du moment où elles perdent de la vitesse, là ça va mieux on peut négocier (souriant, rires) mais tant qu'elles sont... regardez l'Iran, c'est une théocratie.

**Valérie** : parce que on a mêlé religion et pouvoir...

**Roger** : mais non la religion veut le pouvoir la religion c'est le pouvoir (Claire rit et regarde vers Sophie) que veulent. Que veut le prêtre ?

**Valérie** : ça dépend ...

**Roger** : le prêtre ... Mais mais non que veut la religion ? la religion veut le pouvoir

**Valérie** : le pouvoir sur quoi et sur qui ?

**Roger** : ben sur tout ! le pouvoir temporel etc. Enfin c'est clair ! (Claire rit) en Europe, l'Eglise catholique a détenu tous les pouvoirs

**JF** : vous avez pas été enfant de chœur hein vous (éclats de rire) ?

**Roger** = mais non c'est clair ! Mais non ça c'est un argument ad hominem ça ne compte pas

Cooperation and conflictualisation are closely combined, it seems impossible to provide a measure of their relative importance in each group. They always seem to be intertwined in the Paris discussions. The French groups give the impression of confusion because conflict rarely disappears. On the contrary, cooperation and conflict are more in alternation in the Brussels group; but **when it does occur**, conflictualisation is more intense and heated. The most complete sequences of conflictualisation take place between (French speaking) Belgian participants, and always on religion.

Be they concomitant or sequential, cooperation and conflict both occur in every political discussion we observed. We can suggest some hypotheses regarding the way the two processes interact in the discussions we observed.

### ***Comparisons***

Our design allows us to compare the social and national belonging of the groups, in order to understand their distinctive characteristics regarding both the general balance between cooperation and conflictualisation and the mode of interweaving (concomitant or sequential)<sup>21</sup>. Social belonging seems to have some effect on the (im)balance between the two, although the

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<sup>21</sup> This analysis, as we said, is based on one group of each category per country. We conducted a second group for each of them in order to check that the differences were not incidental consequences of a group dynamic. That analysis is a work in progress.

effect is less straightforward than one could expect. The influence of social belonging is less a result of socially grounded differences in knowledge and political sophistication than a result of the different relationship that participants of different social backgrounds maintain with their own opinion.

What should be remembered regarding this, is that focus group discussions, at least when moderated in a non-directive style as was the case here, very much resemble interaction in everyday life: they are far from being well organised<sup>22</sup>. Sentences are seldom complete or grammatically correct; discussions are full of interruptions, of people speaking at the same time, of two or more participants chatting aside while the general discussion goes on. It's sometimes difficult to know to what extent what is heard by the moderator and recorded, is actually heard by other participants. In everyday life discussions as well as in focus groups, misunderstanding is the rule<sup>23</sup>. Communication is neither perfect nor transparent. The conversation continues carrying along incomprehension and rough guesses which cause slowdowns, disturbances and even disruptions. One can distinguish a least two types of misunderstanding resulting either from a bad grasp of the meaning of what has been said (for instance, the mother tongue of some participants is not French or their vocabulary is not usual), or from the complexity or the ambivalence of their stance (Hochschild, 1993). In sum, the disturbance arises from the fact that an opinion is not comprehensible or that the stance taken is not clear. Whatever the origins of the misunderstanding, it blurs the discussion and curbs both cooperative and conflictive processes.

Although cooperation is not deliberation, and thus involves a lesser degree of rationality, it requires some knowledge and an ability to put things into perspective. Socially grounded differences in information and cognitive competence that basically depend on education and social and professional experience do, in this respect, have an influence on participants' ease in cooperating in the discussion. But what is perhaps more influential is the clear difference between the relationships that working class, white collar or executive participants maintain with their own opinion. While executives strongly differentiate between opinions and arguments, working class participants tends to confuse the two (white collar workers being somewhere in-between). This appears clearly in the discussion on Turkish entry in the EU. When asked to give arguments in support of the minority vote, working class participants only justify their own vote, basically with one argument, while executives develop (several)

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<sup>22</sup> Apart from a phase of warming up, that is, once the discussion has properly begun.

<sup>23</sup> It is still the case on transcripts: it is often difficult to be sure how to interpret the meaning of what has been said.

arguments in support of both. They make it clear that they understand why others might adopt the opposite position; something that does not happen in working class groups, and partly hinders partly the process of cooperation.

However, the conflictive process also requires cognitive abilities, namely, the capacity to decode from someone's expressed views his/her more general perspective, his/her presumed solidarities, the stand he/she would be taking on a cleavage. As a consequence, although cognitive sophistication has a clear impact on the content of discussions (that is, on the issues addressed, participants confidence in their own opinions, resources they displayed), it does not linearly influence the (im)balance between deliberative and cooperative processes.

The national impact on the (im)balance between cooperative and conflictive processes in the discussions seems more straightforward than the social impact. (French speaking) Belgian groups are overall more cooperative than the French ones. Before addressing the tricky problem of cultural difference, let us just underline one simple explanation related to the topic proposed for discussion: the (French speaking) Belgians are much more knowledgeable about European integration than the French: they learn it at school, they are frequently told about it in the media, they experience it, particularly in Brussels, as the home of the EU headquarters. Considering that cooperation involves knowledge as we just said, their familiarity with the EU certainly facilitates cooperation on the topic, an advantage that the French very much lack. However, national differences could indeed be attributed to different political cultures, but how can they be specified? Following Hirschman, Gambetta argues that expressing strong opinion, trying systematically to win the point thanks to convincing argument is a cultural matter (Gambetta 1998). He introduces the distinction between deliberative discursive culture and discursive competitive one ("Claro culture" as he labels the latter) and relates them to the structure of knowledge that characterises a society: deliberative culture relies on analytical and local knowledge, the competitive model relies on indexical and holistic knowledge. We did find some elements which corroborate this assumption such as the way in which the cooperative process, (especially in (French speaking) Belgian groups), goes hand-in-hand with an ability to put the link between cooperation and analytical and local knowledge into perspective. Conversely, the way conflictive sequences, especially in the French groups, show a great ability to generalize could be related to the strength of an indexical and holistic knowledge.

However, French and Belgian differences in the (im)balance between cooperation and conflictualisation can be also be related to the structure of national communities and political systems. On one hand, France is an old and centralized nation, fuelled by universalism and

characterised by a contentious social system and a polarized party system; on the other hand, Belgium is a multi-level and federalist government embedded in a polarized society and used to being driven by consensus and coalition.

Moreover, the variety of cleavages empirically available, in the sense that they give rise to conflictualisation, is more numerous in the French groups than in the (French speaking) Belgian ones. But they are mainly cross-cutting and thus, generate complexity in alliances between participants: two participants may take the same stand on xenophobia but then find out that they no longer support each other when state interventionism is at stake. In the (French speaking) Belgian groups, one cleavage obviously dominates the others: religion versus secularization, or more precisely, the consideration reserved to religion in a polity and the impact religion should have on the political system. As soon as this basic question emerges, whether it be because of the discussion of commonality of faith and culture in Europe, or because of immigration or more specifically because of the discussion on Turkey's possible entry into the EU, the group becomes polarised and conflict erupts. Explaining why the cleavage pattern is less hierarchical in one case than in the other would require socio-historical analysis. Our point here is simply to emphasize that the interweaving of cooperative and conflictive processes is the corollary of their different cleavage patterns.

## **Conclusion**

How do lay citizens discuss politics? How much deliberation is there in the real world? These questions are considered to be key democratic issues by many scholars calling for research projects focused on the way people deal with political discussion. Our research design, based on focus groups, allows us to observe empirically and to compare the politicization of discussion in various contexts. Because it is sociologically sensible to put together people who are likely to encounter each other in the real social world and have a chance of understanding each other, we created socially homogenous groups (at least in terms of professional background). But we know from political theory, thanks to Hannah Arendt among others (Arendt, 1995), that politics is linked to pluralism; it supposes a "community of unlike human beings" who differ by the diversity of values as much as interests. Politics being a matter of public acknowledgement of pluralism, we organized political heterogeneous group discussions.

Our first finding is that people deal with politics in two major ways: they both cooperate and conflictualise. Empirically, we can assess that this distinction is not merely a question of social network. In politically heterogeneous groups, conflict can occur; social norms which

favour conflict avoidance can be infringed, when the issue at stake affects socially grounded personal identification, when the clash of “perspective” puts an end to cooperation. More importantly, cooperation and conflictualisation are not exclusive. Neither the ability to change places, to switch from one position to another one, in other words, to take the other’s “perspective” (Arendt, 1995), nor the ability to value and sometimes to impose a social rooted perspective affectively loaded can, alone, account for what happens in political discussion. Whatever the way they interact, concomitantly or sequentially, well- or un-balanced, cooperation and conflictualisation contribute together to the politicisation of discussion. If there is a tension between the two, then it is internal to what the political discussion is. This tension contributes to the process of democratic community building, to the building of the “Body politics” (Latour, 1997). It’s not a matter of choice, not a question of encouraging the one or the other: in a democratic pluralist society political discussion is made of cooperation and conflictualisation.

Regarding the cooperative process: cooperation is generally considered to be an aspect of deliberation in so far as it implies respect for the diversity of opinions, tolerance and openness. Although research on political discussion has been strongly influenced by deliberative theory, we mention cooperation instead of deliberation because the process we observe in the discussions lacks other basic elements which are considered to be a key element for deliberation. When people cooperate they indeed exchange more about facts, presumed evidence or opinions than feeling, experience and identification. But this exchange is nevertheless far from being as rational as deliberation would imply. Most of the information mentioned in the discussion is loose, incomplete or wrong. Moreover, cooperation is partly based on the ability to put things into perspective, which supposes taking complexity and the variety of situations in account, that is, anything but generalisation on behalf of the common good and universal principles. On the contrary, conflictualisation does tend to refer to the common good and universal principles. General statements that lead to conflict are supposedly valid for everybody, everywhere and every time. A third and last criterion differentiates empirical cooperation from theoretical deliberation: deliberation is supposed to favour changes in opinion, yet in our data they are not the prerogative of cooperation, conflictualisation even generates more spectacular changes than cooperation.

Regarding conflictualisation: in line with other works, we consider that politicization is rooted in social location and hence involves conflict, as social identifications are not debatable. But our research has led us to emphasize the political dimension of the conflictive process, reflected in our use of the notion of “cleavage”. Conflict occurs when cleavages come up in



the discussion. Cleavages are fuelled by social identifications but they are most of all political constructions; they are made of composite social belongings but shaped by institutions and organizations, political discourse and public policies. Cleavages are binary: when they arise in the discussion, participants take sides and set up alliances.

Although cooperation and conflictualisation are intertwined in political discussions, social and national backgrounds influence the combination of the two. Finally, we suggest that the structure of knowledge and patterns of cleavages that characterise a society offer the most powerful explanation for the respective influence of each process on the way people discuss politics.

## Appendix:

### Summary of the discussions on Turkish entry into the EU:

	Belgians	French
Working Class	<p>Preliminary vote: 2 against, 4 for (of whom 1 not sure)            Some problems of understanding            Against: women rights            Disagreement on Turkey being democratic or not            For: discrimination, diversity in Europe, economic power (and tourism), geo-strategy  <i>Individual justification of vote: one position, one type of argument</i>  <i>No change</i></p>	<p>Preliminary vote: 5 against, 1 for            Lots of problems of understanding            For: discrimination against Islam            Against: human rights, stop the enlargement, economy            Lots of digressions on France, lots of laughs  <i>Conflict on women's rights in Islam</i>  <i>Individual justification of vote: one position, one type of argument</i>  <i>No change</i></p>
White Collars	<p>Preliminary vote: 2 against, 1 rather against, 1 DK            For: find it difficult to find arguments: geostrategy, Turkey would improve, they want to enter            Against: human rights, too many cultural differences with Europeans, religion and politics, immigration, influence on EU decisions (numerous people)            Many questions raised, few answers, lots of jokes    <i>They all move towards a "rather against" opinion</i></p>	<p>Preliminary vote: 4 against, 2 for            For: why not?            Disagreement on the European project: open or closed?            Against: women and Islam, terrorism, human rights            Some questions raised, highly disordered discussion, numerous digressions on France  <i>Conflict on women's rights in Islam</i>  <i>Two changes of opinion, from yes to no (a women) and the opposite (a man)</i></p>
Executives	<p>Preliminary vote: 5 against, 1 for            Preliminary question about the vote: now or in the future?            For : Turkey would improve, EU empowerment, geostrategy, openness            Discussion on EU continent (geography based) or concept (value based)            Against: neither Turkey (human rights) nor the EU (governance) are ready for that, Islam.            Each point is made carefully, no relationship between the vote and the arguments offered in the discussion  <i>Conflict on religion and power (as a second part of the discussion)</i>  <i>Consensus on 'for in principle', but in the future; Islam is the biggest problem. They acknowledge the fact that they find it difficult to admit.</i></p>	<p>Preliminary vote: 2 against, 5 for            Preliminary question about the vote: now or in the future?            For: Turkey would improve, being open to people who want to join, geostrategy            Discussion about the current state of Turkey (exchange of travel memories and impressions), more particularly the extend of "laïcité" (secularism)            Against: human rights, women rights            Numerous comparisons between Turkey and other countries, digressions on France (including the Euro), each point is made at length, no relationship between the vote and the arguments offered in the discussion    <i>Personal conflict between two participants</i>  <i>Quasi consensus on for in principle, but in the future (one remaining no)</i></p>
Activists	<p>Preliminary vote: 3 against, 3 for            Each argument is first debated and reversed :            Turkey is or is not in Europe,            It's culturally diverse: good or bad            gostrategically favourable or dangerous,            Kurdish genocide: would force them to acknowledge it            Cyprus: would help to fix it            Governability: would destroy the EU or force it to evolve...            Final cleavage (they applaud): is Europe essentially judeo-christian and interested in economic power or humanist and open to diversity?  <i>Conflict on Islam.</i>  <i>No fear of contradicting others, competition about relative strength or arguments.</i></p>	<p>Preliminary vote: 2 against, 3 for, 2 DK            For: Turkey's refusal is discriminatory            Main debate on what "laïcité" (secularism) means            Against: cultural homogeneity of Europe, women rights, EU governability, not yet.            The discussion is very disorganised and confuses the current states of Turkey and France            Numerous historical and philosophical references    <i>Conflict on discrimination</i>  <i>Quite defensive stands, although no fear of disagreement</i></p>

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