Dispositions, Contexts, and Political Equality

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This presentation is about ordinary citizens’ attitudes towards the political realm. I contend that these attitudes are not only diverse and different, but also unequal. I will first discuss the

1 This presentation is based on various qualitative surveys conducted since 1998. Political attitudes are mainly observed through in-depth open-ended interviews, with people of different age, gender, position, condition, occupation, education, membership, and belonging. Among others, I will refer here to qualitative surveys about ordinary citizens’ perceptions of European integration conducted in France, Germany, Italy, and Poland, from 2006 to 2009. More than six hundred interviewees have been met in these countries. In the French case, we have also held focus groups, some of them repeated two times. The main conclusions of this research have been published in Daniel Gaxie, Nicolas Hubé, Jay Rowell, editors, Perceptions of Europe A Comparative Sociology of European Attitudes, Essex, ECPR Press, 2011. In some cases, in-depth interviews have been repeated along time. For instance, I am participating in a research group, named SPEL, for Political Sociology of Elections, whose members have encountered around sixty persons at several times – at least on four occasions -, from October 2011, at the very beginning of the electoral campaign of the 2012 French presidential and parliamentary elections, to 2013. I will also refer to a research on participatory institutions of a city in the suburbs of Paris.

There are several important differences between these qualitative methodologies and more usual research designs based on large samples and close-ended questionnaires. Qualitative samples are smaller and they are not representative. A consequence is that qualitative surveys do not usually provide statistical measures and investigations. Their main findings are not statistical, but consist in ideal types. The aim of our qualitative surveys is to get diversified samples, in line with the hypothesis that political attitudes vary according to several factors, especially education and social class. A second difference is that qualitative methodologies bring more thorough information than quantitative surveys. It takes more time to conduct an interview than a questionnaire, especially when interviews are repeated. It is therefore possible to gather more information about socio-demographic characteristics of interviewees. Qualitative methodologies are also less standardized. Interviewees may be asked to justify and develop their views. They have to express their views with their own means and resources. Conversely, close-ended questions suggest answers. They therefore get standardized reactions that seem ready for addition and statistical exploration. It is obviously easier to answer a question when responses are proposed, and all the more so that the question refers to abstract and ideological issues. A problem is that we do not know if the question has been understood, and if every respondent has understood it in the same way. We have also usually no information about the subjective reasons why a given person has chosen a given answer. It is therefore of particular importance to observe the words that interviewees use, and also their way of answering and body language, when asked about political subjects. We may thus have indications about the firmness of their opinions. Beyond words, we may see what categories, cognitive tools, and modes of production are mobilized.
various parameters that need to be taken into account to characterize citizens’ political attitudes. In a second step, I will go into the issue of political equality.

1. Varieties of political attitudes.
A first component of the relationships between ordinary citizens and political worlds is related to their level of interest in, and attention to, political issues. Such behaviors reveal investments in politics and public policies that may be labeled as politicization.

1.1. Investments.
Several indicators of politicization can be used. Citizens show their political interests in multiple ways, conventional and unconventional. All these forms of involvement are linked together. Those who display their interest in political subjects in a given way are more likely to manifest it in an other way. Some citizens participate in street demonstrations or in participatory meetings or join a trade union, a specialized association, or a political party. Demonstrators are more likely to read newspapers, as well as participants in participatory assemblies are more likely to be members of associations than those who do not participate.

An indicator of politicization is self-declared interest in politics. When asked if they are interested in politics, members of politicized categories may typically express their surprise

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2 I will focus in this presentation on two main opposite ideal types of ordinary citizens' ways of dealing with political worlds. Many empirical individual cases may be subsumed under these two ideal types, although each individual case rarely exactly matches the ideal types, but is only more or less close to it. For a more complete analysis, we also need to distinguish and analyze variants of these types, and intermediate ideal types that borrow and combine several features of the two main types, and also present some specific characteristics. Due to lack of space, these variants and additional types will not be taken into account in this paper.


and say that everybody is obviously interested in politics, whereas members of non politicized strata say that they do not understand politics, that, in any case, there is nothing to expect from it, and that they are not interested at all. For ordinary citizens, the most common mark of politicization is participation in informal conversations about political topics, with relatives, friends, co-workers, neighbors, and other acquaintances. Of course, the likelihood to engage in a conversation about politics depends on closeness and context of the relationship between partners. But when these context effects are controlled, observations relying on this indicator show a continuum of politicization. At one pole of this continuum, people regularly engage in short talks or more developed discussions with various members of their social circles. At the opposite extremity, people say that they never talk about politics. For instance, a former blue collar worker, caretaker of a public high school, says that he even does not speak to his wife about their votes. He explains that he does not know how his wife votes or his parents used to vote. But when asked about the subjects that he talks about with his friends or relatives, he mentions topics such as retirement pensions, level of prices, or unemployment. Taken as an indicator, the frequency of political discussions shows that ordinary citizens are unequally politicized. But the least politicized strata of the public do not stay entirely aloof from political issues. They may enter in episodic and brief considerations about subjects of practical interest, that they, unlike others, do not consider as "political".

Uses of media is a second indicator of politicization. Members of politicized strata regularly consult various types of (more or less) sophisticated media (a broadsheet newspaper and/or a magazine and/or TV or radio news program and/or dedicated sites on the internet). They may also have autonomous sources of information on public issues through their occupations, friends, involvement in associations, and reading of books. They express a desire to be well informed. They are critic and patronizing about media addressing to large publics, such as mainstream TV news, which, in their opinion, give to much attention to anecdotal and futile stories. They often diversify and compare several sources, in order to be able to form their "own" "personal" views, and they are concerned about expressing what they regard as their personal views. At the opposite pole of the continuum, people do not pay much attention to political sections of media, and even little attention to media themselves, which few
occasional exceptions, such as gutter or local press, or short TV programs. They are even easily discouraged and irritated by mainstream TV news, which they blame for their too long and complicated ways of covering politics.

Members of politicized categories display a general diversified political attention. They are (more or less) interested in local, national, and international politics. They may comment on trivial subjects, as well as on high politics. They follow subjects of personal and practical significance, and also general topics. By contrast, members of least politicized strata keep only a distant eye on subjects that may affect their personal situation or the situation of their relatives or fellow persons. They often reveal a real concern about local affairs of their town or village, and, in the course of an interview, they may refer to issue such as unemployment, retirement, welfare benefits, or price hikes.

1.2. Tacit definitions of the realm of politics.

A second parameter of attitudes towards the political realm is about what people have in their minds when they refer to politics. The least politicized citizens implicitly refer to a narrow delimitation of politics. The example of the public school caretaker is typical in this respect. He declares that he never talks about political subjects, and, at the same time, that he sometimes touches on issues such as retirement pensions, level of prices, or unemployment. We may thus deduce that, in his view, tacitly, such issues are not "political". Alike this caretaker, politically indifferent people associate politics with, and limit it to, elections, candidates, ambitions, discourses, pledges, and squabbles. They oppose politics to local affairs, which appear more clear, honest, and effective to them. The politicized citizens also refer to such local and politicking dimensions, but they furthermore evoke a third one, which is associated with issues, ideas, debates, programs, reforms, efforts to solve problems and find solutions. They may also comment on international politics.

1.3. Expectations, preferences, and orientations.

A third set of parameters is related to expectations, preferences, and orientations. Politicized individuals express numerous, developed, precise, and general considerations about their

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hopes and fears or about governmental actions and failures. People who stay at distance of political arenas voice a few vague, ill-defined considerations, or self or family-related aspirations about what has not, or should, be done. When they lament that politicians "do nothing", or "do not keep their pledges", they think of the job they, or their relatives, are looking for, of their retirement, or of the public housing project they are waiting for a long time.

Politicized people display numerous strong preferences. They express positive and negative feelings about a (relatively) large array of political objects: politicians, political parties and trade unions, economic, institutional, social, societal, international, and/or ideological issues. Members of less politicized categories enunciate judgments on a limited number of topics. They often say that they have no preferences, and that politicians are all the same. They only formulate appraisals on a few salient topics, based on self-related criteria, and every day life experience. A young blue collar worker is for example critic about a governmental decision to diminish the duration of the work week on the ground that "it has not created any job, I can see it, my wife is still looking for a job!". He has bad opinions of politicians, whom he perceives as "comedians", "who only think of themselves and their career", with the exception of Jacques Chirac, "who suppressed the army [in fact the compulsory military service], it was good for me !". A groom for a riding school also worries about unemployment, and links it to the presence of migrants, who "take jobs", while his niece is unable to find one. He says he has no political preference, but that "the only thing he is sure about is that he dislikes socialists, because Mitterrand [former socialist President] gave voting rights to Arabs". His judgment does not refer to a precise decision. He makes perhaps a confusion with a program of regularization of the situation of undocumented migrants decided a long time ago by the former President, and he links it to his perception that "Arabs" [one of the most visible ethnic minorities in France] are more and more numerous and assertive in everyday life.

Politicized publics proclaim general political and ideological orientations. They state for instance that they are "liberal" or "socialist", or that they are on the left or on the right. Non-politicized categories do not claim such general political orientation. They never refer to usual political and ideological categories that politicized individuals mobilize as tools of guidance.
When asked, they say that they are neither on the left nor on the right. When they have to make their choice, for instance when they have to vote, they abstain, rely on the advice of a relative, issue ethical judgments on politicians as persons, or form an opinion by attributing their personal situation, often their personal difficulties, to a political party or leader, or to the incumbent government.

1.4. Attitudes towards voting.

Relation to voting is a consequence of this third dimension of political attitudes. Politicized categories give much importance to their votes. They vote regularly, practically in all elections, even if, in the recent period, the younger members of these categories turn out more intermittently, and tend to focus on first-order elections. They attach many significations and expressive interests to their choices, which are made through much reflection and calculation. At the opposite, less politicized publics do not regularly participate in elections. A growing proportion abstain from voting, at least intermittently in second-order elections. Those who turn out do not pay much attention to their vote. They vote because they believe that it is a duty, because they have been incited to by a relative or a friend, or because they fear some negative reaction from local administration if they abstain. Such voters do not attach much significance to their choice, which is often immediately forgotten. They make a choice because they have to cast a ballot, rather than they vote in order to express a preference.

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6 I repeat here the main results of a quantitative research by questionnaire reported in Daniel Gaxie, "Le vote désinvesti. Quelques éléments d'analyse des rapports au vote", *Politix*, n°22, deuxième trimestre 1993, p 138-164.
1.5. Skepticism and distrust.

A fifth component of political attitudes is relative to skepticism about, and distrust in, political actors. They are particularly developed in the contemporary period. There are however several types of skepticism\(^7\). Among the non-politicized categories, we may speak of an ethical skepticism, because politicians are denounced on ethical grounds. They are perceived as selfish, only thinking of themselves, their career, and the good life associated to power. They are said to make a lot of pledges to be elected, that they do not keep, and to speak a lot, but do little. This skepticism is ambivalent. Politicians do not help others and solve problems because they mainly think of themselves, but it is tacitly assume that they could do more if they wanted to. A young intern in a riding school explains in this line that the President travels a lot abroad for his pleasure, and thus, that he does not deal with unemployment. Members of these categories also hope for politicians who could be less selfish and would tackle their problems and difficulties, and they sometimes refer to exceptions.

Politicized citizens adhere to a more informed, involved, sophisticated, and political skepticism. They may also share common views about moral weaknesses of politicians, but they add many other considerations and arguments. They have a more lofty vision of politics, and they insist that they do not share the coarse opinion that "all politicians are rotten". Their criticisms stem from their comparisons between politics as they see it, and as it should be, according to their demanding expectations. They are knowledgeable about politics and able to compare past and present, or governments from different countries or political affiliations. They say that they are less interested in politics than they used to be, but they go on keeping informed and follow the news. They often make a distinction between politics as it is

presently, and as it was in the past. In their views, politics has become, but has not always been, "lukewarm". There were "statesmen" in the past, but, nowadays, "politicians are only managers". There are presently few, but, in the past, there were true, differences between left-wing and right-wing political parties and governments. Many of them note with regrets that "governments [tacitly national governments] have less room for movement than they had in the past". They often emphasize that "economy is presently stronger than politics", because of globalization or European integration.

This politicized skepticism is also ambivalent. Politicized citizens display inclinations to believe again. They, for instance, betray renewed political dedication and commitment in times of mobilization, such as electoral campaigns. They are convince that there are few differences between left and right-wing parties or governments, but, at the same time, they claim their preference for one side or another. The manager of a cozy hotel and restaurant on the French Riviera is a typical example in this regard. He is vehement about the present state of politics at the beginning of French presidential electoral campaign in fall 2011: "UMP [Union for a Popular Majority, the main French liberal conservative party], the PS [Socialist Party], all you want, it's awfully fanny ! It's just for money! You just stuff yourself ! The more power you have, the more you laugh !". At the same time he says that "he is not a left-winger", and, a few weeks before the 2012 presidential election, he states that he "cannot imagine the left into office, reforming catering, they would kill us, people like us, they will kill us!".

1.6. Statutory competence and incompetence.

Statutory (in)competence is a sixth aspect of political attitudes. It is a tacit feeling that you yourself are able (or not able) and that you have to (or do not have to) deal with political affairs. Citizens who keep aloof explain that "[they] are not political", that "politics is not for people like [them]", that "it is too complicated, and [they] do not understand much". They tacitly refer to their statutory position in various divisions of labor when they try to justify their incompetence. Some say that they are "too young to take interest in politics", and that they "still live with their parents". Others declare that they no longer pay attention to politics because they are retired and too old. Some women report that they do not know much about
politics and that they follow advice from their husband. Others explain that "you have to read books to be able to cope with politics", that "politicians have studied a lot", and that "politics is too hard for [their] small head because [they] have not enough education".

Citizens feel politically competent or incompetent similarly to how a court rules that a case is within or beyond its jurisdiction. Feelings of competence or incompetence are the results of attitudes of self empowerment or dis-empowerment. Politicized citizens think that it is natural for them to form and express their own personal political views, that they are able, and that they have a responsibility, to answer opinion polls, to participate in deliberations and to take the floor in public meetings. They never refer to a general personal incompetence, which is a way to claim tacitly for competence. Some of them may apologize for limited incompetence on a given subject (some say for instance that "they are not good at economics" or that they "do not know much about Europe"), which is also a way to imply that they are good at others.

To the opposite, self dis-empowerment is widespread among non politicized categories. Their members may however felt empowered to express views on a few issues. They may for example state that an employment policy is ineffective because they know that they themselves, or some relatives, have not found a job. Similarly, they may declare that "Europe" is negative because they have noticed that prices have increased with the euro. Their self empowerment is doubly limited. It is limited to a narrow range of salient self related topics. Secondly, these topics are appraised in a limited way. Non politicized citizens may complain that political pledges about fighting unemployment are not followed by concrete consequences, but they do not enter in a discussion about the decisions that have been, or should be, made.

1.7. Cognitive competence.

Statutory competence is closely linked to a cognitive political competence. At one pole of the continuum of political investments, people express developed views on a large number of

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8 In this sense, see, Daniel Gaxie, "Cognitions, auto-habilitation et pouvoirs des "citoyens"", in Revue Française de Science Politique, vol. 57, n°6, décembre 2007, p. 737-757.
issues. They are (more or less) able and willing to participate in current political debates. They repeat the current arguments they have heard or find by themselves. They (more or less) master words of political language, and information about institutions, politicians, political parties, public policies, and ongoing political events. They are used to mobilizing specific political tools of perception and assessment (for instance categories such as "liberal", "conservative", "middle of the road", "right" and "left-wing") to issue judgments, even if they may also refer to other non specific short-cuts. They are able to adopt political ways of thinking, that is to say general, abstract, and synoptic viewpoints.

At the opposite, people face more difficulties in expressing opinions on political issues. They have limited information, and, sometimes, no information at all, on political objects. They rarely make use of current specific political categories, or, if they seem to do so, it is with a non specific meaning, through a process of involuntarily translation. If they venture on political subjects, they awkwardly refer to current words, categories, and heuristics that they mobilize in their everyday life. They, for instance, make moral, rather than programmatic, political, or ideological judgments on political actors and candidates. In such cases, they take the personal characteristics of a few leading politicians into account, and they can briefly comment on their honesty, energy, skills, appearance, tics, way of speaking or dressing, or marital status. They are unable to adopt the abstract language of politics. As previously mentioned, they mainly mobilize a self-related mode of thinking when they have to issue judgments on political objects. Their lack of political cognitive equipment is not a consequence of intellectual limits, but rather a result of structural dispositions. They have neither the inclination nor the desire to give time and attention to topics that they do not understand, and that seem of no consequence to them. They do not even think of entering in discussions on subjects they perceived as obscure, unintelligible, and pointless.

Cognitive competence depends on, and varies according to, political contexts. All things being equal, it is easier to make judgments on political parties and candidates when programmatic, political, and ideological differences between them are important. The larger

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the ideological distance between political actors, the more citizens are likely to mobilize political instruments of perception, classification, and evaluation. Conversely, in the contemporary period, where political and ideological differences between candidates, parties, governments, and programs have faded, it is more difficult to perceive differences, to make sense, and to find one's way in the course of ordinary events. All things being equal, again, the level of cognitive competence is presently lower than it was in more mobilized past periods.

There is a close association between statutory and cognitive political competences, since they tend to reinforce each other. The more people feel justified in dealing with politics, the more they are willing to pay attention to political news, and the more they are informed about them. Conversely, the more people are knowledgeable, the more they feel competent to take part, at their citizen level, in political activities. To the contrary, those who do not feel authorized to tackle political subjects are prone to keep their distance. Their lack of current information reinforce their conviction that they are not able to understand politics, and that it is not something for them. Even though they are linked, the two sides of political competence are nevertheless relatively independent. Some citizens have more statutory than cognitive competence and vice versa. Research on opinion polls\textsuperscript{10} shows for example that some citizens, often in intermediate social positions, could not stand to look ridiculous when asked about a subject they are not familiar with, and prefer to give an answer, even if they have no real answer to a question. Conversely some people, for example members of lower classes with politicized relatives, who say that they do not understand politics, may be able to develop (relatively) thorough considerations about a few issues.

1.8. Modes of production of opinions.

\textsuperscript{10} I have conducted a research on this topic. See Daniel Gaxie, “Au-delà des apparences ...sur quelques problèmes de mesure des opinions”, \textit{Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales}, art. cit..
Because of their unequal level of cognitive and statutory competences, citizens have recourse to different modes of production when they express their views on political issues. Non-politicized categories are deprived of any means of production on many subjects, especially the most general abstract, political, and ideological questions. Otherwise, they produce opinions by proxy, that is to say by following and repeating the views of opinion leaders, who may be politicians, trade-unionists, or ordinary people around them. Depending on the issue, they may also express judgments through ethical translation and mobilization of moral criteria to evaluate political objects. This applies, for example, when they choose candidates for their supposed moral qualities, rather than for their programs, statements on main issues, party membership or ideological orientation. But, as previously mentioned, a common mode of production among citizens with limited cognitive competence is to issue judgments on political actors, issues, or situations, based on private situations, concerns, or difficulties. Even though European affairs are remote for most citizens, including members of politicized and educated categories, few people are completely unable to make a judgment on "Europe" when asked during an interview. Among working classes, many express highly critical opinions of "Europe", because they think that "Europe" equates to euro, and that the introduction of euro has impoverished them in causing significant price increases.

There are however several species of this type of opinions based on ordinary experience. In the example just mentioned above, people are only able to connect their negative personal situation – they think that prices have increased and that they have more difficulty making ends meet - to a political object, to which they are confronted, in this case "Europe", as a result of an interview situation. They are unable and unwilling to look beyond the perception of negative consequences for themselves. They never address other aspects of the debates and arguments developed in various public arenas about the euro. Faced with the same questions, members of intermediate social categories, also particularly exposed to European regulations

and policies, such as farmers, react somewhat differently. Their opinions about "Europe" are also closely linked to their perceptions of its consequences for themselves. In their case, it is more about the Common Agricultural Policy than about Euro. Farmers who think that the CAP has had positive impact on their standard of living say that they are in favor of Europe, and vice versa. Their judgment is mostly reduced to this criterion alone, and if they happen to mention others, they suggest that they do not matter much in their eyes. The difference with the mode of production of members of working classes is that they are knowledgeable about the CAP, through their union press, and even, for some of them, through training sessions on European issues organized by their union or a Chamber of Agriculture. They are able to discuss, and they often discuss, with people around them, various aspects of the CAP, even very technical ones. They may for instance speak endlessly about the financial aids they receive, the norms and regulations they must comply, and the checks they undergo. When they have to express views on "Europe", they mobilize a limited (with regard to the number of issues taken into account), by fully-fledged (with regard to the number of dimensions of these issues that they take into account), mode of production. By comparison, their counterparts from the working classes mobilize a mode of production of doubly limited capability, both as regards the small number of issues taken into account, and in respect of the narrow range of aspects of these few issues that are considered.

Members of educated and politicized publics are rarely deprived of means of production of political opinions, even if they turn out to be poorly equipped to deal with several general issues of European integration – for instance questions related to the "democratic deficit" or the need to build a "European political union" –, which are nevertheless commonly subjected to samples of the entire population of Member States, through opinion polls, such as Euro Barometers. These educated and politicized citizens may mobilize several modes of production, including those identified above. But they also, and they often, handle and master a specific political mode of production. It means that they are able to mobilize political and ideological tools when they have to make a judgment on political objects. People, for instance say that they are against European Union, at least as it presently is, because it is "a liberal Europe", a Europe that "gives priority to free competition, and free circulation of capital and
labor", instead of being a "social" Europe, which "would be concerned with improving the conditions of work and life of Europeans". Such tools are currently circulating in political public debates. It follows that only those who master them are able to take part in such debates or, at least, to form and express opinions about arguments that are exchanged in the course of these debates. Political and ideological categories, principles, references, criteria, questions, and assumptions, are also abstract overarching tools that enable to make sense of, and judgments on, a wide range of issues. In this respect, the mode of production of opinions through mobilization of political or ideological principles is the only mode of production with full jurisdiction over political issues. Politicized citizens are "independent" owners of specific political and ideological means of production or/and, more often, of means of reproduction, of political opinions. They, and they alone, are (more or less) able to produce, and/or, more often, to reproduce, by their own means, politically structured, and therefore cohesive, viewpoints, on a large number of issues. They can act politically on their own at their level. They alone can behave as citizens, in accordance with the tacit model defined by the normative facade of democratic systems.

1.9 Background of political attitudes.

Attitudes towards the realm of politics are closely linked to the social background of citizens. For this reason, political attitudes are a particular case of attitudes towards the social world. For this reason also, political attitudes are structured and structuring dispositions, that cannot be easily changed.

Most politicized citizens belong to upper intermediate and upper social categories. They enjoy a high, or relatively high, level of formal education, usually tertiary or university education. They are engaged in skilled occupations, often with responsibility and power. Their position in the social world encourages confidence in their personal capacities, and they display their confidence in most circumstances of their everyday life, including their eventual activities as

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citizens, such as defending their views in everyday conversations, or speaking at a meeting of participatory democracy. They readily express their opinions and say what to do. For upper middle and upper social categories, incentives to address political issues are many and multifaceted. They live in social circles in which it is common to exchange personal views on public affairs. They have to hold their position in current social interactions, and it would be difficult for most of them not to be minimally informed on several sets of topics, including political ones. Due to their education, their language level is close to, or is not far from, the level of most political debates in public spheres. Even if they have not acquired instruments of perception and evaluation of political objects at school, their formal education has provided means to acquire such instruments, and has developed dispositions to make necessary efforts to their acquisition.

There are a few exceptions to this close association between political involvement and belonging to educated and privileged social categories. One explanation of these exceptions is the commitment to a trade union or association activist career. Such commitment provides a kind of substitute, but not an exact equivalent, of formal education, with cognitive tools, means of accumulation of political information, progressive familiarization with debates about abstract topics, overcoming inhibitions to deal with political issues, and development of a sense of self-competence, especially a subjective political competence.

Apart from their activist fractions, lower and lower middle social categories lack the cognitive and statutory resources that predispose to political involvement. Due to their (relatively) low level of formal education, they are neither prepared nor inclined to get into abstract discussions. They know from their experience that they have neither the words nor the language to take part in conversations with politicized persons. They occupy subordinate positions in their day-to-day working life. They are more accustomed to being told what they should do than to decide themselves what should be done. Dispositions associated to political involvement of ordinary citizens, such as taste for political discussions, or regular uses of specialized media, are alien to the ways of living of lower and lower middle social categories.

2. Political inequalities.
Once we have characterized the various types of relationships that ordinary citizens maintain with political worlds, we need to discuss how such differences are also a source of inequality. It is of course well known that citizens are unequally politicized and competent in politics. However, these differences are at the same time known in principle, but often ignored in practice, and in many expert, journalistic, and academic analyzes. For example, opinion surveys take for granted that it is natural to question representative samples, and hence, potentially, all citizens, on all political issues, including the most technical, abstract and esoteric ones, as we may see, among many other examples, with the Euro barometers. Over the last decades, the denial of political inequalities has taken a different form, with assumptions about the rationality of political ignorance and indifference. It is said that, whether informed or not, citizens achieve the same result, because they vote. Citizens who lack sophisticated assessment instruments use makeshift substitutes, labeled "information shortcuts", or "heuristics", when they have to vote. Because they are able to, and they usually, vote, without having to bear the costs of political information, they are even considered as more rational than involved and informed citizens. One may wonder that authors, who probably belong to the most knowledgeable strata of the American society, get into such a panegyric of non-information. However, it is more important to highlight the weaknesses of their reasoning.


2.1. Inequalities of involvement.

Firstly, it must be stressed that citizens are not involved to the same extent in the various activities open to them. Whatever the political situation or institution, the more citizens feel competent and empower themselves, the more likely they are to take part, and, conversely, the more they feel incompetent and dis-empower themselves, the more likely they are to stay at distance. Such inequalities are evidenced for elections, opinion polls, deliberative polls\textsuperscript{15}, street demonstrations, institutions of participatory democracy, informal political conversations, expressions of opinions on radio, television, or in newspapers, and so on… The assertion that inequalities of political skills are not relevant, because citizens vote, whatever their level of political interest or information, is somewhat inaccurate. It has been shown for a long time that low-politicized citizens, and, therefore, most members of lower and lower middle social categories, are more likely to abstain from participating in any election than their more educated counterparts. Of course participation and inequalities in electoral participation also depend on the context. Inequalities are stronger for weakly mobilized, such as second-order, elections, than for first-order ones. In a period of distrust in politics, electoral participation has declined, and inequalities in electoral participation have increased, in almost all democracies\textsuperscript{16}. The same pattern is true for opinion polls, deliberation, and participatory meetings. Whatever the sampling methodology, politicized, and therefore educated, citizens are over-represented. It is known for example that pollsters who use quota sampling face difficulties in complying with quotas for the lower social classes. It must be added that even when quotas are met, it is doubtful that respondents are fully representative of the category to which they belong. They are more likely to be close to politicized fractions of their category.

\textsuperscript{15} See, for instance, the data provided by \textit{Tomorrow's Europe}, during a press conference, on October 14th 2007, about the EU-Wide Deliberative Poll.

such as skilled unionized workers among blue-collar workers. The same is true with random sampling. Every member of the population has an equal chance to be selected, but those who are drawn randomly are unequally willing to participate in a survey, a deliberation, or a participatory meeting, on political or public policy issues. Random samples are also, almost inevitably, self-selected samples. As James Fishkin puts it, "Athens random sampling… was conducted from a citizen list of willing participants".

Once again, all political participation depends on social and political predispositions of potential participants, but also on the context. Without disappearing, inequalities in participation are reduced when the topics covered by a survey or a meeting are salient for those who are usually reluctant to engage in political debates, or when rewards are linked to their participation.

The reasons why people agree to participate in a survey or a participatory meeting are not often questioned. A few studies in this direction show that these reasons are diverse, and that not all participants are fully interested in the topic of the survey or the meeting they accept to participate in. Ask about the motives of their participation in a local consultative meeting, some new residents explain for example that they wish to establish contacts for a better integration in their new place of living. Questions about the nature of the interest in the participation in a given political experience is particularly relevant for those who are not usually interested in such experiences, especially when financial rewards are offered.

Every political event – election, survey, demonstration, participatory meeting - produces selection effects, that are cumulative and occur throughout the event. It follows that those whose presence is less probable, and linked to some contextual aspect of the event, are also

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17 For survey results in this sense, see Daniel Gaxie, “Au-delà des apparences.. sur quelques problèmes de mesure des opinions”, art. cit..
20 Guillaume Petit, "Patterns of participation in local democracy : transaction structuring between official stimuli and presumed social demands", Presentation to Paris/Torino 2012/2013, art. cit.
more likely to interrupt their participation prematurely, and all the more so that the length of
the event increases\(^{21}\). If they stay, they also have less chance to take the floor, and if they do,
they also have less chance to make themselves heard.

2.2. Inequalities of competence.

It is said that ordinary citizens are experts of their everyday life. They are supposed to master
a so-called "secular", "ordinary", or "user" competence, that entitles them to speak, and
enables them to compete with other forms of expertise, either technical or political. Such
competence, may, in some cases, but may not in others, disarm inhibitions to speak in public,
even if feelings of embarrassment remain more likely for those who consider themselves
incompetent in public affairs, and are aware of the awkwardness of their way of speaking.
However, the composition of the assembly is a factor that must be considered. The research
we have conducted with the focus groups shows that when people gathered know each other,
and have the same (low) level of education and information on European affairs, they speak
more easily, but, most often, to reinforce one another that they know nothing about Europe
and that they do not care. Also, as previously mentioned, there are several types of such user
competences. The ability to invoke everyday life experience to draw attention to a given
problem does not necessarily imply that it is associated with a capacity to discuss all aspects
of the problem. It is not, for example, sufficient to be aware of price increases to be able to
discuss their causes, and the decisions and policies that might stop them. A user competence
entitles to speak about a limited range of issues. It also enables to exchange views on a
variable number of aspects of these issues, according to the knowledge of these aspects,
knowledge that does not, or only partly, result from user experience. It is only when user
experience is supplemented by other types of knowledge, either from general education,
occupation, or voluntary activism, that "ordinary" citizens are able to discuss on an (more or
less) equal footing with experts, technicians, civil servants, and elected representatives.

\(^{21}\) Julien Talpin, "Les moments qui façonnent les hommes. Éléments pour une approche pragmatiste de la
compétence civique", *Revue française de science politique*, art. cit..
Exchanges of arguments in the course of a participatory meeting may increase the level of cognitive competence, particularly when efforts are made, for instance with deliberative polls, to inform participants, with invitations of experts and representatives of collective organizations involved in the subject of the meeting. The increase in cognitive competence depends on the duration of the participatory experience. The most deprived participants cannot in a few hours overcome their handicap vis-à-vis those who have accumulated substantial cognitive resources throughout their lives. It is also known for a long time that people who follow a training program, are all the more likely to increase their level of information that it was higher before\textsuperscript{22}. Efforts to improve the level of information of a public may paradoxically increase information inequalities. The focus groups we have conducted during our research on ordinary citizens' perceptions of European integration show that a few participants have increased their level of information about European integration during the sessions, while, for others, no significant changes could be observed. Of course, even if some of them were repeated twice, such focus groups are experiences of short duration. However, in the particular case of asymmetrical groups, with an opinion leader well versed in European affairs, some participants were able to take advantage of the explanations provided by their opinion leader, and to express a limited range of politically structured opinions, they did not display at the beginning of the meetings of the group. Such a rise in cognitive competence was observed in a limited number of cases, among people with an intermediate level of formal education, but not with lower-level participants.

2.3. Inequalities of legitimacy.

Even though the possibility of claiming a user competence may encourage to intervene in a deliberative body, it may also elicit reactions of stigmatization. Such reactions are a consequence of unspoken rules that are at work in public spaces of deliberation\textsuperscript{23}. Among


\textsuperscript{23} Julien Talpin, "Jouer les bons citoyens Les effets contrastés de l'engagement au sein d dispositifs participatifs", *Politix, art. cit.*.
other requirements, participants are expected to seek the general interest. Those who defend their particular interest too openly are likely to raise reactions of skepticism or rejection. In a deliberation, speakers who are able to express general points of view are more likely to be heard than those who are accustomed to examine and discuss issues from the viewpoint of their personal situation. It may be observed for instance that participants in an official neighborhood Council use two different speaking "registers" or styles. A first one may be characterized as "particularizing". In such a vein, people raise problems by explaining how they are personally affected. As a woman puts it : "I have a question ! I bike and often I have to ride the wrong way [because of a new traffic plan]. Now what can I do? Also [about garbage collection], you know, me, every night, I go down to the place [where bins are stored] to put the bins [in order]. I do that every evening. It's not normal. I should not have to do that". A second way of speaking may be labeled as "generalizing", since people mobilize general principles and speak on behalf of other inhabitants, with the example of a man : "I am involved in early childhood development, and frankly, I ask myself, is there a future in this district? What are we going to leave to our children? … [about public works] such a repetition of [public] works, at the same place, it's not understood by the public, [turning to elected representatives] you will have a lot of com[munication] to do, I say that for you [in your interest]". Those who are able to adopt a generalizing and abstract point of view are regular participants, while others are more intermittent attendees. The former are active in associations, and involved in various participatory institutions of their town, such as participatory budgets, or consultative councils on city planning. They are known by people around them, and they are asked to transmit some requests to persons in charge during meetings of the neighborhood Council. They also appear to be in familiar terms with local elected officials. They, for instance, exchange their mobile numbers. Such participants who express their viewpoints in the expected forms are more likely to make themselves heard, to articulate convincing lines of reasoning and to get satisfaction. During an interview, some explain that when they call a department at the City Hall to report a problem, they easily get
an access, they are even sometimes known from the person in charge, and they usually can be heard and understood\textsuperscript{24}.

Members of lower and lower middle categories are unlikely to get involved in political or civic affairs, unless they feel that their private situation and difficulties are at stake. If they get involved, they will stick to their personal concerns. They often stay silent and wait the moment they get information about questions that interest them. If ever they take the floor, it will be to set out such personal concerns, in a private or "privatized" way, mobilizing a self-related mode of production of their arguments. Their speeches run the risk of being perceived as a narrow advocacy for personal interests, and discredited as such. In addition to their awkward way of speaking – at least from the point of view of attendees who master, and are attached to, the legitimate way of speaking -, their difficulty to adopt a generalizing and abstract point of view is an handicap in regard to their ability to convince an audience.

\section*{Conclusion}

In a democratic system, citizens are equal in principle, and before the law, but, in practice, they are not equal in political affairs. When scholars write about inequalities, they have to make explicit the points of view from which they claim to observe them. From a normative point of view, citizens are expected to participate in civic activities, and first of all, in elections. A first source of inequality therefore lies in participation in political activities, especially in voter turnout. However, contrary to assumptions of cognitive psychologists, democratic citizens are not only expected to turn out at elections. They are supposed to exercise their voting rights to maintain their control over their rulers' activities, decisions, and public policies. But citizens are unequally interested in, informed about, and willing and able to exercise their judgments on, political activities and public policies. A second source of inequality results from cognitive and statutory competences of ordinary citizens. These competences influence the manner in which citizens conceive and practice relations of representation. At one pole of the continuum of political competence, the delegation of power

to representatives is limited and controlled. Confidence is granted to rulers through the vote, but it is constantly re-examined, in the light of statements and actions of political actors. Political representatives are constantly under surveillance by citizens who feel able to evaluate and criticize their actions. At the opposite pole, citizens do not feel qualified to scrutinize what political representatives are saying or doing. They keep away from political affairs. They merely examine whether their situation has improved or not, and they attribute this result to the rulers. Within politicized categories, the delegation of power to representatives is held back, while non-politicized citizens not only delegated, but, even more, abdicated, their powers.

As far as representative democracy is progressively supplemented by participatory or deliberative democracy, citizens are normatively supposed to take part in participatory and deliberative institutions. Citizens are however unequally able and willing to participate in participatory and deliberative meetings and, even more, to play an active role during these meetings. They are also unequally able to exert influence during such meetings. From a pragmatic point of view, for the same reasons, citizens are unequally able to further their interests in the political order. Informal current conversations on political affairs are, for instance, the most common way through which ordinary citizens express their views. There are millions of such brief conversations, on numerous subjects, every day, that contribute to form collective opinions, which political actors need to take into account. But citizens are more or less prone to participate in such conversations. Insofar as they do take part, the number of subjects, and, for each subject, the number and range of related questions, they are adept at, and that they feel like, discussing is also unequal. The larger the number of political issues, and for each issue, the wider the range of considerations, that citizens are able to master, with their own means, or/and with the help of an opinion leader, the more they are likely to connect their personal needs, concerns, and expectations, to positions in political debates and to policy decisions. Only those who master a politically structured mode of production can express politically cohesive views on a large array of issues, in various circumstances, including arguments in conversations, choices about parties and candidates at each election, answers to opinion polls, votes in referendums, involvement in street
demonstrations and social movements, and collective memberships. The more they are politically competent, the more they have a chance to behave consistently in political affairs, in line with their political and social interests.

Political inequalities are linked to social inequalities. As Delli Carpini and Keeter put it "political knowledge, political power and socio-economic power are inextricably linked in the real world … those least advantaged socially and economically are least able to redress their grievances politically… Inequality in citizen knowledge .... mirrors their standings in the social, political, and economic world". Because of such backgrounds, political attitudes are structured and structuring dispositions. Their effects also depend on the contexts in which they are activated, but political inequalities persist more or less, whatever the context. It is probably impossible to eliminate political inequalities, at least in our present historical horizon. They may possibly be reduced, albeit with great difficulty, through mobilization of a large amount of social energy, will, and resources. Those attached to democracy and, therefore, to political equality, must not yield to the temptation of conceiving too easy illusory means to achieve it. They must take the full measure of the extent and causes of political inequalities to seriously consider how they could be contained.