Designing participation procedures: an input-output analysis of municipal participatory devices

ABSTRACT
In the context of the widespread discourse on the “representative democracy crisis”, participatory devices can be promoted at the local level, as "symbolical activism" to improve citizens’ agreement and electoral representatives' legitimacy. This paper aims to address two sets of questions relative to participatory devices. The first concerns their promoters, their social characteristics, strategies, motivations and expectations. The second focuses on the influence of the devices’ conception on both the population which tends to participate in the initiative and participation patterns that emerge. We address these questions through a study of two different kinds of devices: online and offline without artificially comparing two heterogeneous blocs called online and offline participation.

Keywords: Citizen Participation, Online Participation, Local politics, Social Determinants of Participation, Patterns of Participation

The “crisis of representation” is a widespread discourse in contemporary democracies. It is carried out by different actors and covers variable meanings. Referring to political decisions, actors or institutions, it points out their lack of representativeness, their legitimacy deficit and their inability to ensure community cohesion (Revault d’Allonnes, 2013). Without questioning in depth its reality, relevance or novelty, we assume that, as a self-fulfilling prophecy, it might have a prescriptive effect, because political actors and citizens take it into consideration. Then, it is possible to affirm that “the development of participatory device fits into a context of ‘crisis of representation’ more and more internalized by elected officials (...) Participatory democracy (...)is a part of this symbolical activism [to arouse agreement, loyalty and legitimacy]” (Lefebvre, 2012)

It is thus noteworthy that questions and challenges to political actors’ right to represent social interest can emerge. Political representatives can be actually challenged (during elections, public debates or social movements…), or they can also simply take this possibility into account on their own initiative. Challenges to representatives’ legitimacy can then be “directly oriented against current politicians and elected representatives, based on the denunciation of their failures. (...) But they can also result from initiatives and innovations impelled by the political actors themselves” (Boutaleb, Roussel, 2009). We are here interested through our cases in participatory devices that are launched both by political actors and in spite of them.

In this context some procedures that aim to ensure better representation are often presented as a remedy to the “crisis”. Participatory democracy and, more recently, electronic forms of participation are proposed as a solution. Before analyzing our cases, it seems important to understand to what extent the two of them are linked.
While the very first literature on electronic participation pointed out the differences between online and offline participation and presented the first one as a breakthrough tool capable of revitalizing democracy in “crisis”, recent research is much more focused on describing and understanding the changes of forms of political participation due to use of Internet, conceiving online participation as an additional form of participation. Laurence Monnoyer-Smith (2012) explains this change of paradigm by stressing that every single new communication technology wakes hope concerning revitalization of insufficient political participation. This hope was strengthened and accompanied by some hypothesis defended in academic field. Internet was supposed to allow immediate consultation of citizens’ opinions and to facilitate dialogue between citizens and elected officials (Boure, Loiseau, 2003), to facilitate participation thanks to its asynchronous character, which tended to cover up social status distinctions (Witschge, 2004) and it was considered as a tool encouraging actors to consult other sources and defend their point of view in a more robust way than in a face-to-face discussion (Gastil, 2000). In a nutshell, electronic participation was supposed to succeed where offline participatory devices failed.

Today, the boundary between online and offline participation seems to vanish from literature, as the Internet becomes an integral part of everyday life. In his recent paper, Farrell (2012) even predicts that researchers will gradually cease to explore this medium in itself. Instead, he proposes to study in detail various forms of participation to identify some causal mechanisms and factors influencing participatory processes. In this paper, we share his point of view. We voluntarily study online and offline forms of participation to analyze political participation in terms of motivations, political engagement or political strategies without artificially comparing two heterogeneous blocs called online and offline participation.

Many scholars have recently been interested in this perspective. Most of them studied participatory projects including both offline and online devices and focused on the public’s characteristics and participation patterns. We decided to adopt a different perspective because the two sets of participatory practices we study are totally offline or totally online; none of them combines online and offline participatory devices.

The first large set of questions structuring these studies is how public divides up between online and offline debates and what are the motivations that favor the first or the second discussion environment. For instance, Hooghe, Marien and Oser (2013) show, based on a latent class analysis of a U.S. representative sample, that there is a distinct group that prefers online forms of participation, however, these individuals are often also involved in offline forms of participation. Thus, online participation could be considered above all as an additional element of an existing repertoire of political activity, but sometimes also as a form of entry into political engagement. Such observation is in accordance with the general debate about participatory devices. Those can be seen as an extension of other forms of citizenship or civic involvement: voters, petitioners, and volunteers… Opportunities for participation would then be an added form of expression, mainly seized by those who were already capable and rightful to do so. To the last extent, it would be, as a new avatar of “hidden census” (Gaxie, 1978), contributing to the reproduction of political domination and division of political work in our western societies.

Studying at the same time online and offline forms of participation also allowed researchers to
establish a relationship between the technological setup of device and the forms of participation observed on the field (Monnoyer-Smith, 2011). As Monnoyer-Smith and Wojcik claim (2012) “One can clearly see that the form of argumentation, type of justification and interactivity vary according to the setting, showing differences even between different online settings”. In consequence, they suggest that hybrid (online and offline) settings allow a broader discussion and a larger set of discourses than either by itself. Inspired by this research, we will try to describe the sociological profile of participants and to understand to what extent the participation device design is connected to participation forms in our case studies. In other words, we study the “device effect” in order to question the recommendation of hybrid settings. Through our cases, we would like to understand if offline participatory device have the same or different impact on participation than those online. It will allow us to affirm or to nuance the hybrid devices superiority thesis. Our second contribution to the literature, focused both on online and offline forms of participation, will be to understand the sociological characteristics, motivations and interests of the participative devices’ promoters, who have not been studied so far from this perspective.

Distancing ourselves from drawing strong boundaries between online and offline participation, we base our approaches on the same set of notions describing the current participatory vogue. Scholars of participatory democracy have developed some notions to allude to the fact that delegation might be called into question. Some talk about “participatory context” (Blatrix, 2000), “participative imperative” (Blondiaux, Sintomer, 2002), “deliberative turn” (Dryzek, 2000). These notions can be understood, as practices, through the multiplication of participatory devices and as theoretical knowledge and scholarly discourse, connected with these practices. To some extent participatory processes have become a norm in local policy-making. Such ‘imperatives’ or ‘consensuses’ are both justified and reinforced by discourses and beliefs about a crisis of representation.

In sum, we empirically investigate the inferred meaning of citizen participation in the process of policy-making. More specifically, we deal with an offer that policy makers or institutions present to citizens: to get involved in arenas that promote the opportunity to discuss policies. Indeed some institutions see themselves as purveyors and promoters of participation in their area (Anquetin, Freyermuth, 2008). From the neighborhood- or city-level to entire regions, we can observe a “consensus about participation” (Gourgues, 2010). Besides, nowadays a set of legal obligations exists to make some forms of public consultation mandatory in western democracies, most of the time related to land settlement, city planning or environmental issues. But in the context of participative injunction, we also find a voluntaristic offer of participation in the development, production and assessment of public policies. In our cases, we are interested in participatory offers that are voluntary.

Furthermore, elected officials and political institutions are not the only actors promoting participatory devices at the local level. There is nowadays a “market of participation” involving different types of actors: advisors, who are more or less activists (Nonjon, 2005), working for and with specialized civil-servants (Mazeaud, 2012). All these “professionals” and
“craftpersons” (Carrel, 2013) of participation are often very connected with researchers and universities (Blatrix, 2012). Our study, which aims to compare participatory devices launched by a municipality on the one hand, and one created by an independent foundation on the other, permits us to understand to what extent participation at the local level becomes a good and a resource for its promoters.

In both cases, we investigate the significance of an offer of participation to citizens by elected and non-elected officials. How do their promoters justify participatory devices? What do they expect from such activities? To what extent does the design of the device they propose influence observable political participation patterns as well as the social composition of the population taking part in the participatory projects? What can we learn from the comparison between online and face-to-face participation in different contexts and situations?

**Empirical Protocol**

*Two most different cases*

Our paper is based on two cases that are characterized by a number of distinctive features. It is inspired by most different cases comparison initiated by Clifford Geertz (Geertz, 1968). This comparative approach requires building analytic categories and focusing on them rather than on variables that separate the cases the researcher wants to study.¹

On the one hand, this variety allows us to explore and examine many angles of our subject, while on the other hand it can be criticized as too heterogeneous to permit relevant comparison. We are aware of the limits implied by the juxtaposition of our two cases and thus recognize the exploratory status of our paper. But we nevertheless contend that such exploration can provide a unique perspective on our subjects at a theoretical level. Even before that, our study of two most different cases reveals some surprising similarities.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>A - Italy</th>
<th>B – France</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>City population</td>
<td>1,300,000</td>
<td>18,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participatory devices</td>
<td>Online participation website</td>
<td>Town meeting and working groups</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of participants</td>
<td>880</td>
<td>Whole public : 300 (rough estimate) Annual forum : 100 Local political association : 60-80 Board and groups : 10-30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Setting</td>
<td>During an election campaign</td>
<td>In the course of a mayoral term</td>
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<td>Organizer</td>
<td>Independent foundation</td>
<td>Local elected representatives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intentional positioning</td>
<td>Around the election Connecting debate and elective process</td>
<td>During the term Connecting citizenry and policy-making process</td>
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¹ Just as Geertz compares Indonesia and Morocco because of Muslim culture those two countries have in common, we study two municipalities with different characteristics because what interests us is not to compare these municipalities, but to address some common research questions about participation offer and those who promote it.
on electronic democracy as among the leaders of Internet use for civic participation at the local level in Italy. Thus, unlike other early local participatory devices online, it was not the city council but a non-profit, independent foundation created at the university, that was at the origin of various initiatives to which the city owed the title of the leader. This paper focuses on one of the foundation’s flagship projects, the platform created before the municipal elections, called CM2011. Its purpose is to give city residents and candidates in municipal elections the opportunity to discuss local public problems online. The platform’s sections can be classified in two main categories: dialogue-oriented (“Forum” and “Problems and Proposals”) and information-oriented (“Events” and “Users’ profiles”). This platform is part of a long-term project of promoting "the inclusion of citizens through the Internet”. This site is indeed conceived to be used during the election period, but is also a tool of political mediation between citizens and elected officials after the elections when some candidates become part of the city council. This long-term approach of CM2011 differentiates the website from other ad hoc platforms launched by candidates for electoral purposes.

B – In this town of 18,000 inhabitants, the local council elected in 2008, had a left-wing majority, constituted mostly of non-profit organization activists without partisan label. It is the first time that this city had a left wing government. Participation is at the core of the council’s political project. Since its election and even before when running for election, the different actors (elected representatives, members of associations, lay citizens…) practiced and talked about participation of inhabitants in policy making process. Indeed this orientation of the municipal project found an echo since the beginning of the campaign and the writing of the platform (workshops, meetings at home, and public meetings) and shortly after the elections by the creation of one-time participatory devices. What the administrative and elective teams call their “tools” is classified into 5 categories explained in a document “instructions for local democracy”: visits in a district; public meetings; advisory councils; thematic workshops; users’ committees. These 5 methods of participation are in a sense the stages of a “citizen career” from least to most demanding. There is in addition an annual forum.

Research methodology and data

We conducted our field studies by applying a range of qualitative and quantitative tools that allow us to present comparable data about the promoters and public of the online and face-to-face participatory devices we observed. The chart below summarizes our empirical research protocols. For both cases, a quantitative approach through the use of a questionnaire is a central point. Without limiting our work to this approach (qualitative data collected through interviews and observations are also used), we try to fill in a gap in the current scientific literature. Most of the concepts, notions and affirmations we start from are well-documented and already known, but often limited to general intuitions or particular description, with little quantitative empiricism. We can’t overcome all these limits, because we are restricted here to two very different case studies. But we tried to take a step forward by confronting this very general issue of participation in its concrete realization physically in a medium-sized town and virtually in a large city.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Case</th>
<th>Online device</th>
<th>Offline device</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Content analysis</td>
<td>Site’s access statistics. Content of the web-platform’s various sections</td>
<td>Written content (election campaign material, local newspaper and city magazine, meeting-minutes)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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1. Offering participation opportunities: a resource that can be mobilized in different fields

1.1 Implementation of participatory devices as a distinctive mark

Both the French local government and the Italian foundation for participatory democracy online mobilize a participatory rhetoric in their official discourse. It can be used as an important resource to reinforce their positions in the field in which they operate: political for French local government and both economic and scientific for Italian foundation. For instance, for French local political actors, participation is a distinctive mark to be used in comparison with their local political opponents. Likewise, the Italian foundation is clearly in competition with free market consultants and providers of ICT solutions for local authorities as it promotes its software within different municipalities nearby. In other words, participation is a resource mobilized by heterodox agents trying to restructure their respective (political or economic) field.

In our French case, local democracy as a campaign theme is presented as a signature, distinguishing the group both from right wing former majority and potential partisan opposition from the left. Current municipal opposition often counters the majority’s policies using participation as an argument. As counter-arguments, the opponents use the legitimacy of representative democracy and the need to make clear choices instead of always discussing them. They mock current participatory devices as “manipulated tools of communication”. The recurrence of this discourse illustrates the importance of local democracy and participation as distinctive marks for the local representatives (whether it is appealing or repellent). Also in our Italian case, the foundation highlights the device’s participatory character because it allows the organization to distinguish itself from other actors in their fields of action (both academic and economic). In the academic field, members of the foundation present themselves as scholars who combine theory and practice, who design participatory devices based on theoretical assumptions in order to observe and assess their use and contribute to building other theoretical models. Members of the foundation publish articles on their devices, presenting them at the most important conferences in the area and organizing some academic events themselves. The participatory devices they create become their case studies. The academic capital status of expert that the foundation cumulated this way is then converted into an important resource in
the economic field. The experience gathered in participatory domain distinguishes the foundation from other structures and allows it to sell developed tools to local governments of other municipalities.

1.2 A valuable resource socially determined by organizers’ biographical paths and pre-existing communities

Participatory democracy is strongly associated with a leading figure. Although local democratic devices can be designed against the idea of centralized power, the fact remains that they can contribute at the same time to reinforcing electoral and professional positions. Nevertheless it must be noted that these benefits are given to a particular actor, invested sincerely and for a long time in favor of citizens’ participation. Such profits are hardly gained through opportunism, and in any case they are not definitively acquired or granted. For both leaders, the mayor and the foundation’s president, the participatory thematic has been a useful resource accumulated during their initial professional career and mobilized for their late career respectively in political and economic field. The participatory approach is a guiding principle in their biographies. For instance, during our interview, the mayor described himself as a “professional animator” to evoke his past professional activities; his last and only diploma is linked with this function. Similarly, even if the Italian Foundation president first graduated in physics, she built her entire academic career around informatics and she gradually specialized in electronic democracy. According to her curriculum vitae and her reputation, she was among the first in Italy and in the world “to study from informatics perspective the technologies offering a renewal of democracy”. In fact, a very early and constant interest in so-called electronic democracy constitutes an important element of her legitimacy as an expert in electronic participation.

Moreover, both leaders translated their early interests into creating organizations aiming at participatory devices. Two decades ago, the French mayor co-founded a local association whose goal was: “thinking together about how the inhabitants could take the floor and organize themselves to give their opinions, even when not asked to”. As for the foundation president, in a very first stage of Internet popularization, in 1994, she founded a research group that became a major scientific reference for the researchers interested in electronic democracy. Also, she cooperates with experts in this discipline from all over the world, and participated in the creation of international academic networks and research projects concerning the topic.

What we observe is that there is a strong link between careers of local leaders and their will to implement participatory devices. This link is evident in the biography of the mayor, who his own team and inhabitants who get involved clearly see as the figurehead of these policies: “it is my own tendency... I mean, anyone knows that I am the one bearing and initiating... about... the place that local democracy occupies in our project”. When he uses participatory principles, the mayor is converting and recycling professional capital into political capital. We understand “professional capital”, as social capital in terms of a network of relationships and interactions (Bourdieu, 1986): “I know this sector very well professionally... I have been working inside this network for thirty years... Maybe it is for this reason that the colleagues have chosen me”. But it also refers to habits and an experience of participatory approaches which constitute them
as a *modus operandi*... In the same way, the foundation president was able to convert her professional capital accumulated in the academic field into an important resource in the economic field, for consulting purposes. This organization is the dominant expert concerning electronic participation in the region.

Furthermore, participatory projects are also often fed by a pre-existing community, for instance local associations or virtual communities. In our French case, it is the association created by the future mayor that started to get involved in local political competition during the 2001 elections. For ten years this local political association has gathered 60 to 80 people involved in local actions and playing a role of citizens’ watch by coming to municipal council meetings, organizing public meetings and distribute a local newspaper… These former sympathizers can be described as the core of the public and supporters of local democracy. Similarly, although addressed to the entire local population, the foundation’s activity relies heavily on a virtual community created in the early 1990s when it offered inhabitants internet access and a first discussion space on the Web. As Anna Carola Freschi (2002) noted, the foundation’s initiatives led to the creation of a virtual community linked to a local community that fosters the participation of various local actors. Twenty years later, faced with the proliferation of virtual communities and social networking, the extant virtual community is the basis of the participants of the analyzed platform and an important internal resource increased by social status of some members of the community. They have considerable social capital because of their functions as member of city council or entrepreneurs in ICT. In fact, a new user does not open his CM2011 account directly on the website, (which is, as we already said, built for local elections), but on the platform *PartecipaMi*, the permanent site of local political discussion in the city, managed by the same foundation. *PartecipaMi* users can use their username and password for the CM2011 site, permitting them to recreate on the new website the social relationship already developed within the permanent local discussion online community. Most CM2011 users, 82% in our survey, come from the permanent local online discussion platform *PartecipaMi*. Dating to 2007, it legitimates the CM2011 website in local citizenship practice (Tournadre-Plancq, 2009).

* We can summarize our findings thus far in four points:

- The participatory approach is understood as a distinctive mark, both by its promoters and detractors.

- The citizenry’s participation as a local political project is closely linked with charismatic personalities and their own careers. These preliminaries are often the clues of the recycling of capital acquired through professional activity or former involvement in local networks, into political capital.

- Designing participatory devices is promoted as a new solution to some problems of contemporary democracy that leaders seem to observe.
Implementing participatory devices doesn’t come out of nowhere, but results from former experiences and individual careers. They also occur in a collective dynamic that has to be maintained. Typically here we see the role of preexisting communities like the former and permanent platform or the local political associations created for the campaigns and kept alive during the mayoral terms, as opposition structure from 2001 to 2008 and as support for the majority after 2008. These former members are at the same time potential promoters and the public for the participatory devices. With respect to the online platform, we observe that this particular practice is most likely to occur if a proposed participatory device is based on a pre-existent virtual community. These observations confirm the importance of social capital, in the sense given by R. Putnam².

2. The meanings of the participatory devices’ design

According to Scott Wright and John Street (2007): “technology is both shaped by, and shaping, political discussion”. These Anglo-Saxon researchers are interested in the material dimension of public spaces and they demonstrate, through a study of the English Parliament layout, that interactions within a public space are strongly framed by its architecture. In the French context, Laurence Monnoyer-Smith makes the same observation with respect to offline and online public debate. As the layout of the room where the debate takes place reinforces the symbolic power of certain actors, the architecture of online platforms tends to facilitate some users’ appropriation of the device at the expense of others. “All deliberative devices have a technological dimension. In the simplest and oldest form of deliberation, the technology consists of spaces that are set up and allocated for public discourse.” (Monnoyer-Smith, 2011). Deloye and Ihl advocate for a material approach to democracy and point out, for instance regarding elections, how organizing its practical aspects is not only a matter of protocol, but also “forecast and frame the way social capabilities and political instrumentation join in the act of voting” (2005). This approach helpful for understanding what participation patterns emerge as a result of particular participatory devices.

2.1 How practical and procedural aspects imply political inferred meanings

The participatory devices’ design reflects their promoters’ will to accompany political practices of users who must adhere to certain rules. Such aspects can be explicated through a kind of contract concluded between promoters and participants. We see it when the local council presents its participatory program and distinguishes five different tools with various themes, different aims and progressive levels of involvement. On an online platform we also find these sorts of rules. For instance, all interventions are moderated prior to their publication. Very often, the moderator intervenes and slightly modifies messages, sometimes publishing them in sections different from those users originally selected, sometimes changing their appearance. Practical and procedural aspects of participatory design implies a protocol and a grammar which defines the boundaries of what promoters expect, at least from a formal point of view. But beyond those explicit instructions, some other structuring practical aspects that are less

² “social capital refers to connections among individuals –social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them. In that sense social capital is closely related to what some have called “civic virtue” (...) [but] embedded in a dense network of reciprocal social relations” (Putnam, 2000 : 19)
obvious even though equally intentional, can be identified.

*From “procedural” to “substantial” issues*

The first tendency of participatory devices’ promoters is to switch in time from “procedural” to “substantial” issues. For instance, the topic of the annual forum in the French municipality has changed with time: it was first dedicated to methodological discussions about participation and then became a citizens’ forum dealing with real issues. As the mayor announces in his introductory speech: “In the last four years, the municipal team I lead has proposed many forms of meeting, debate… workshops, advisory councils… (…)For me, 2012 is a pivotal year (…) this year you are taking part in our first ‘citizen forum’. As opposed to previous years, we won’t deal with principles or methods anymore. Now we are dealing with everyday issues, issues on which we consider it necessary to exchange words and to know your opinion to enlighten our choices as elected representatives.”

Putting aside short-, mid- and long-term observations we find this logic of “introductory offer”, from dealing with values and principles to taking concrete actions in hand. The group of inhabitants can remain more or less the same, but then the design of the device is evolving from advisory council to users’ committee. For instance a group had first to observe why and how pedestrian and bike traffic could be improved as advisory council. When the group was named officially a “users’ committee,” its aim transformed to publicizing the new itineraries and to supporting actions to make them more attractive.

The same development is illustrated on the Italian website by “Problems and Proposals” section. While within the “Forum” section participants can discuss all the topics they judge necessary, in this particular section the users must focus on very concrete issues of local reality. Indeed, it is only possible to report problems observed in the area and to propose solutions to them. Therefore, users cannot publish a solution to a problem that has never been reported. If this happens, the moderator, after contacting the author of the content, moves the action to the forum or asks the user to report a problem *a posteriori*.

*Various levels of participation allowed*

Then, in order to involve a larger number of participants, participatory devices promoters’ tend to allow diverse levels of involvement. For example, the “Problems and Proposals” section mentioned above supports purposeful conversations within the so-called deliberative space: it allows citizens to gather constructive proposals to problems previously mentioned (a proposal is constructive if it solves at least one problem) and invites other citizens to discuss problems and proposal in different ways. Firstly, the participants can agree (thumb up) or disagree (thumb down) on a certain problem. In consequence, the most heated issues should emerge and appear on the top of the list, which might be a contribution to local agenda setting. Secondly, one can personally sustain a certain proposal. In this case, her/his involvement becomes stronger, because her/his name and photo will appear in the proposal subscribers list. Thirdly, one can argue for or against the proposal, which the promoter considers as the strongest form of involvement. Also in the French town, the choice has been made to set up one-shot participatory devices, which present various level of involvement (e.g. the five tools mentioned previously).
The use of this methodology instead of long-term groups, such as neighborhood councils, aims at making participatory devices more open and inclusive. Local council members try to handle the difficult problem of social diversity in participatory devices by choosing a methodological approach (one-shot, short-term, and thematic groups). This objective is reminded when they are asked about the absence of neighborhood councils in their town, while such devices are usually the classic instrument of local democracy. By doing so, they wanted to allow diverse level of involvement and avoid any notability phenomenon among participants. This kind of “project-driven” approach (Boltanski, Chapello, 1999) might be in favor for “zapping involvement” (Ion, 2001), and less promising regarding logics of learning, politicization, and empowerment.

2.2 The device’s design matters also for the composition of the public

Despite the differences in the studied devices’, sociological characteristics of our samples are similar and their composition corresponds to classical results of sociological literature on the participatory public. To begin with, our samples are primarily male: 37% of participants are women in French case and 39% in Italian one. Young people are under-represented in the sample. In French case, the participants are mainly from 40 to 60 years old; in Italian case 54% of respondents are over 50 years old. While in French case this particular result confirms what existing research says about the poor inclusiveness regarding younger individuals, the Italian case constitutes a surprise regarding the literature on e-participation. According to some authors who compare hybrid (both online and offline) devices, while online activists do not differ from offline activists in terms of gender or socio-economic status, they do in terms of age: they are significantly younger (Hooghe, Marien, Oser, 2013). In this particular case, the low number of young respondents is striking, because all studies of the city’s electoral campaign show that youth participation and control of the use of the Internet have contributed to winner’s success in the mayoral election, who was also supported by most users of the website (Giovananza, 2011). This activism relied heavily on social networks that provide models of communication and interaction that are different from those proposed by CM2011 on this site. For instance, Facebook allows its users to exchange ideas in a dynamic non-moderated environment; according to some authors, these features seem to be crucial for youth participation in political discussion. The CM2011 platform, in contrast, is designed as a virtual area of political debate built on complex and more developed arguments. As the community manager stated in an interview: “Citing sources, providing comprehensive comments and responses, which won’t be limited to four lines… Using our real name… Following the evolution of the debate in which we participate. It seems to me that these are the standards that exist in real life. In digital life we must follow the same rules. This cannot be a jungle.” Even if the relative absence of young individuals can also be explained by the fact that the majority of website’s users were recruited from the virtual community created in early 1990s by the Foundation, as mentioned above, it remains true that the platform’s architecture and design can influence who participates.
It appears that our samples are essentially made up of individuals from the upper-middle-class. The professional category over represented in both our samples in comparison to the municipal population is the senior executive category (cadres et professions intellectuelles supérieures). The over representation constitutes + 20 in French case, 33% of the sample, and in the Italian case this category constitutes nearly 50% of the sample. Furthermore, comparing to the group’s percentage in the population, while pensioners are over represented in French case (+10, 29% of the sample), their number in the Italian sample corresponds to their percentage in the whole population (15% and 16%). This difference could also be explained as the device effect. The offline participatory device attracts more pensioners, while online participatory device is more likely to attract professionally active people because it allows participation at a distance.

The less represented groups in our samples are workers and unemployed: there are no workers and four unemployed in the Italian sample and only six unemployed people and seven workers in the French one. Moreover, in French case, if we examine these profiles in more detail, we see that among these seven, two are in fact retired, one has been a permanent trade-unionist for 10 years, one has been unemployed since 2011, and a last one checked both boxes of worker and employee, adding that he has a baccalaureate degree. In Italian case, three among the unemployed participants are students and one woman is a housewife. However, all of them are members of a political party, three of them voted in the primaries and three were even candidates in the local elections, which can be an indicator of a strong interest in politics. These details highlight the absence of active workers from the working class in our sample and underline the special features linked with participation among members of the popular class. Those individuals are very specific and are an exception in two ways, compared to the rest of the participants and inside their own social category.

The participants’ educational levels also confirm the relative social selectivity of participatory devices. People who answered our surveys have higher degrees than the rest of the population. The category “master’s degree” accounts for nearly a quarter of French sample and a third of Italian one. Bachelor's degree represents 14% of both of the samples. This importance of relatively high levels of education, as a marker of our samples, reminds one of analysis of interest group activism. Like F. Heran said: “the main point is the direct link between cultural capital and interest group activism, which requires less wealth than time and literacy” (1988). In spite of the high correlation between group membership and commitment to local democracy in both cases, it seems that participants in the offline device are more involved in groups (71% of French sample) than participants in the online device (30% of Italian sample). It seems that studying local democracy is rather layered with local associations and others forms of involvement. This is easily understandable regarding the links between local democracy and group life as formulated by the municipality. In the French case, we proposed several “levels” of involvement in associations, from member to activist and planner in different type of organizations (sporting clubs, cultural, social, neighborhood, trade union, political parties…): 56% answered “activist” or “planner” in at least one association. Only 15% limited their involvement to activity “consumption” (for example in the sport clubs). Fifty-nine percent answered that they were really (19) or rather (40) interested in politics, and for 80% of them this stated level of political interest has rather not (40) or not at all (40) been influenced by their involvement in a participatory device. The platform’s users prefer some less demanding forms of participation, such as petitions and collective ones, such as public demonstrations. A common
point is the fact that in both cases very few or none of them belong to a political party; those who take part in the participatory devices values their apolitical, and above all apartisan aspects. The reasons they advance to account for their involvement are related to local issues, general citizenship norms.

Despite the differences between political participation forms preferred by people from our samples, these results confirm globally that people already interested and somewhat active in politics are more likely to participate, but more interestingly it also shows that those forms of political participation can involve citizens who are not strongly committed to political involvement, especially through political parties. Thus the profile of respondents to an offer of participation that emerges from our study is not unexpected; previous scientific literature has made similar claims of social selectivity. Nevertheless, we insist here on the relevance of these results, at least for two reasons. Firstly, we confirm this claim using quantitative approaches, which are not frequent in previous works. Secondly, we study this result of social selectivity in a particular context of actors having internalized such statement for themselves. In fact, they are aware of it and try to override it, by using online technology or alternate participatory devices. That’s why there is an interest here to study if there is not a kind of “methodological illusion” or “tools-blindness” to think that this practical layout can influence on its own the sociology of the public mobilized in such participatory arenas, whether they are face-to-face or on-line.

2.3 Participatory patterns as a result both of the device and social characteristics of participants

Participatory devices are often criticized as manipulative. Without totally reconsidering this aspect, participants questioned about how they understand what they are doing in these arenas remind us about that such criticism tends to underestimate people’s lucidity. Most of them are clear-sighted about the limits of this exercise; they play the game according to rules that they have understood. This pragmatism, even if expressed differently according to social position and appreciation of the utility of participatory devices for oneself, is clearly illustrated by the preference for one or another participatory tool. In the case of Italian platform, different users prefer different sections of the website. Similarly, French participants use the participatory device which suits their needs but also their visions of participation, both socially differentiated. In the Italian case, the most striking difference can be observed between two categories of participants: inhabitants and candidates in municipal elections, which stresses the importance of the political context and position in reference to the political field for political participation. Before the official presentation of the electoral lists of candidates, only 35% of messages within dialogue-oriented spaces were posted by prospective candidates, while after the presentation of the electoral lists this score reached 70%. Unlike candidates, the citizens seemed to be dialogue-oriented from the very beginning of the project: they used the platform to seek an online space that encouraged public discussions on issues relevant to city life. In the initial period, they were the most active group of participants in initiating forum threads (citizens opened 78% while the candidates opened 22% of the threads). In the electoral period, these scores were reversed.
(citizens initiated 32% of forum threads while candidates initiated 68% of them). This could be explained by an appropriation and hyperactivity of candidates during the campaign rather than sudden passivity of citizens. Citizens indeed continued to participate in the forum discussions. Moreover, according to the site’s usage statistics, citizens also continued to go back to the online space and followed the discussion. Out of 10 members with the highest score of log in, five were regular citizens while the other five worked on the platform. The first candidate in this ranking was 11th.

Additionally, a difference in appropriation patterns can be observed between the more constraining and concrete “Problems and Proposals” section and more abstract “Forum” section. Actually, the discussions within the forum are more numerous than the problems and solutions’ section (335 vs. 194). It shows in itself that the process of appropriation of problems and solutions tool was more complex. Thus, it is interesting to look at social characteristics of those who chose to publish some content in this section. Their profile is unusual concerning two variables: strong associative engagement linked to some responsibilities within the organization as well as high level of education (Masters’ degree and PhD). The choice of “Problems and Proposals” section also corresponds to previous experience of individuals choosing this section, which can be described as not very involving because limited to signaling problems and proposing some solutions to be (or not to be) taken into consideration by local representatives. The users of this particular section have the experience of signing petitions rather than of being member of citizen boards and often compare political participation to their experience of informatics, which is visible for example in this quotation from an interview: “When I make software available to a client, I often include a bug tracker. If the user has any problem with the software, he opens what is called a "ticket" in order to report this problem and make me fix it.”

Procedural layout of participatory device and their political positioning meet the social characteristics and former experience of participants. Such statement follows by extension the same logic of what D. Gaxie calls “understanding of politics and rallying of social experience” (2002). Influence of the device on its public is particularly noticeable when we look at the evolution of the same device through the time. We already talked about the local citizen forum which took place every year between 2009 and 2012 and how it evolved to become much more participatory over time. Such repositioning did have an impact on who was in the room. If we look at how different the public present this year was from previous ones, we find signs of more inclusiveness, for example if we take into account the most and the least represented group of our sample regarding their professional category and their diploma. Indeed, as we noticed before, our sample is globally unbalanced regarding those criteria: senior executive and pensioners, bachelor and master degrees are overrepresented; workers and unemployed, vocational qualification (i.e. French BEP and CAP) are underrepresented. Focusing on those criteria we see that the group of the newcomers in 2012 makes appear a corrective tendency among our sample. That is to say that even if the overrepresented categories are present in all the dated groups from 2009 to 2012, the underrepresented ones are concentrated in the last one. Despite the low numbers, this last group appears to be socially more inclusive. This effect can be linked with the new political positioning of the event, a relative incorporation into the municipal landscape and the material and procedural efforts made in this direction: communications, invitations, random selection in the electoral list, phoning by polling organization. Looking at the levels of income by household per month confirms this tendency: 54% of the incomes lower
than 2240 belong to this newcomer group. But at the same time this group doesn’t have a lower measure of standard deviation, on the contrary it is even one the highest. It means that is not only marked by better inclusion of the underrepresented, but more globally by greater social diversity. This reasoning doesn’t only fit with social characteristics, which are far from being the only criteria that model patterns of participation. As stated above, a strong indicator among our sample is the fact of being a volunteer in a local association. Among our French sample 75% are in this case, but if we look at the group of the newcomers it is lowered to 65%. Another important marker is how long people have been living in the town. Those who have resided there for more than 10 years cover 65% of our sample. This rate is lowered to 56% when we look at those who only came in 2012.

The annual forum is a single event: it is not the most demanding device in terms of mid- and long-term involvement. But this result regarding the evolution of one particular device, the annual forum, is confirmed when looking at the whole picture of the participatory devices implemented during this term. For the purpose of this analysis, in order to remain significant regarding our numbers, we keep only the devices for which we had more than 10 participants in our sample. We look at how they are distributed according to two important criteria: volunteering in an association and residing in town for more than 10 years.

What we see is that the most unexpected participants regarding those criteria are concentrated in the same categories. We compare their weights in those five devices with the distribution of presence among a global set of 20 participatory devices. The two devices that are the most appealing (+10) to those who are the least expected, regarding the criteria of residential duration and volunteering, are two thematic workshops regarding two general issues, with ecological grounds: sustainable development and environmentally friendly modes of transport. The two types of participatory opportunities, which seem to be less appealing to those minorities of our sample, are very locally-oriented: neighborhood meetings and public meetings about the future of the city center. We observe more a thematic than a device effect, because the other thematic workshop, which is also locally-oriented, tends to be relatively less attractive to the minorities. Here we should add that some particular participatory devices are easier to reach than others: for example a committee on a playground placement or the users’ board for municipal facilities such as a child-care center or library. In our interviews, the council member and mayor are indirectly responding to each other about such example of “small democracy” (Mothé, 2006): “At the beginning, local elected officials were not really excited about this “playground committee”, for them it was a bit a “low-end” subject… Finally we did it, and it was rather successful. We had participants, people who usually don’t come and probably won’t come to something else… young people, many women.”

Further explanations could be usefully advanced with regard to such distribution, but to keep it brief the important idea is the fact that looking into details the choice of participatory devices

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3 These 5 devices are: (number of attendances among our sample)

3 Thematic workshops about: the future of city center (16), sustainable development (12), pedestrian and bike traffic (20) / Neighborhood meetings (31) / Public meeting about the future of city center (28)

4 The total number of attendees at one or more participatory devices in our sample is equal to 169. The distribution of this total according our two criteria is: long-term inhabitant (YES:76%/NO:24%) ; Volunteering (YES:84%/NO:16%)
permit to highlight the differentiated appropriation and understanding of participatory opportunities. Different kinds of devices propose differentiated means of appropriating local involvement, whether in the guise of face-to-face or online debates. Promoters who offer these opportunities for participation have their own interests. It meets with potential participants in a preexisting environment characterized by the unequal distribution in social space of the resources, interests and legitimacy that lead them to take part in participatory devices. Their design and positioning can then be analyzed to understand to what extent they have an impact, but they remain one component of a larger equation and can’t be fully understood independently.

Conclusion

The observed different uses and interpretations of participatory devices invite to think about the effects of framing through their design and positioning. It means for the promoters that there is leeway to improve participatory devices, especially that, as we shown, these devices represent for them an important resource. Such room for maneuver is nevertheless highly determined by social standing and political context. Social selectivity, local online or offline networks that existed previous to the participatory device, membership in these networks and length of residence are still strong determinants of involvement in local participatory devices. It means that in spite of the potential effects of design, the social and political contexts stay the first explanation of participation patterns. This leaves a considerable challenge for researchers and institutional designers. These results are valid both for online and offline device we studied, which means that the devices often presented in the literature as very different, depend on the same rules and tendencies, both social and technological.

Indeed it is undeniable that participatory devices are appealing to a minority of individuals who are already relatively integrated in the local public sphere, or competent enough to want to be. They find here a way to deepen their civic activism. Some of these actors are then devoted to true strategies to construct ´careers in citizenship´. But a sizeable minority also has the occasion to participate in a domain where they are beginners, especially when they are attracted by a specific issue or driven by a precise interest, which corresponds to the progressive concretization of devices we observed. Participatory devices are also a way of initiating local involvement that can be easier to join than a political party or a preexisting association. This easiness can even be reinforced in case of online device for the most digitally-skilled individuals.

For the elected representatives who are facing numerous and contradictory demands it might not only be a practical answer, a way of acting while temporizing and tempering at the same time, but also an important resource in competition within their field of action. Local political team voluntarism through the setting of participatory devices can amplify local authorities’ “ability to listen”. But the results of this choice are still dependent on the unequal distribution in society of the “ability to talk”, which comes before the “ability to be heard”; even if more of those who open the doors of city hall are still more likely those who were already at the door step (i.e. local associations members) or who were somehow able to enter through the window (i.e. petitioners, loudmouth and notables). In spite of these limits, participatory democracy still increases
stakeholder diversity in local public debate. But such diversification stays very intermittent (Carrel, Neveu, Ion, 2009), and local representatives set the tone for it (Blondiaux, 2007).

Analysis of the multiple individuals’ trajectories and positioning among the participatory devices’ public helps us to understand how what is said to be a political innovation is also anchored in an ordinary state of local involvement. The next step would be to outline the stated conditions for a participatory movement, which would not be only prefigured in preceding networks. Better understanding of how a granted participatory opportunity is or is not grasped by some citizen would allow researchers to gain access to a range of answers to the question of how people wish, or are able to wish, to participate in the democratic process?

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