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(doi: 10.2383/31358)

Sociologica (ISSN 1971-8853)
Fascicolo 2-3, maggio-dicembre 2009

Ente di afferenza:
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Essays

The Political Meanings of Institutional Deliberative Experiments

Findings on the Italian Case

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doi: 10.2383/31358

Introduction

In this article we present the results of research on two Electronic Town Meetings promoted by the Regional Government of Tuscany in 2006 and 2007. The two events are part of a tendency to institutionalize deliberative processes which has spread through Italy in recent years. Tuscany is an area in which electoral support for the centre-left coalition has remained more stable than in the other Italian regions, and it has withstood the profound changes in the national political system provoked by the political scandals of the early 1990s and the rise of Berlusconism. Tuscany is also characterized by a strong tradition of civic and political engagement, as evidenced in the past fifteen years by the wide presence of new social movements and grassroots groups, which, while often mobilizing against the policies of centre-right national governments, have also contested certain strategic decisions taken by the centre-left local government. More generally, these forms of self-organized participation express criticism against the post-democratic tendencies of the Western democracies.

The research was conducted over two years. It involved a team of researchers who used both quantitative investigation techniques (a survey of participants at the two events) and qualitative ones (interviews with key informants and institutional actors, participant and non-participant observation, focus groups comprising members of the grassroots groups included in, and excluded from, the two participative events,

and analysis of official documents). By reconstructing the relationship between the political context and the features assumed by new *ad hoc* deliberative arenas, investigation was made of the political meanings of the two participative events promoted by the Tuscan regional institutions.

Our analysis of the deliberative events highlights their poor inclusive and discursive qualities, which markedly contradicted the institutional actors' self-representation. Considering the features of the context in which the two experiments were conducted, they performed not so much deliberative functions as political ones which served the needs of the political class. To the detriment of other public arenas, the new arenas of participation have become important symbolic factors in reinforcing the image and the legitimacy of the government's decisions, and in promoting the regional administration's image of openness, progressiveness, and efficiency. By channeling the participation of local civil society into *ad hoc* spaces isolated not only from the public sphere but also from the arena of interest bargaining and from the party political arena, the political class has also managed to maintain control over the processes of its own selection.

Put briefly, our hypothesis is that, at least in some contexts, deliberativization may be a parallel and complementary development of – rather than an antidote to – post-democracy tendencies [Crouch 2004; Mastropaolo 2001] and party cartelization [Katz and Mair 1995], thus producing further tensions with respect to the deliberative ideal.

Institutions and New Deliberative Arenas

The creation of *ad hoc* deliberative arenas open to direct participation by citizens has attracted growing interest from institutional actors, including supranational ones [European Commission 2001; OECD 2001]. This interest initially arose in liberal democracies mostly led by centre-left governments [Fung and Wright 2001, 5-6], but it has recently also grown in authoritarian political systems such as China.[1] In democratic regimes, these new arenas are expected to make a major contribution to reinforcing democratic legitimacy and to intensifying flows of information useful for improving institutional efficiency [Papadopoulos and Warin 2007a].

The definition of these new arenas of debate arises from the approaches to deliberative democracy which seek to remedy deficits of consensus and efficiency in liberal democracies through new institutionalized procedures [Cuesta *et al.* 2008;

[1] More information on deliberative experiments in China is available at the website of the Center for Deliberative Democracy (University of Stanford): http://cdd.stanford.edu/polls/china.

Fishkin 1991; Font 2001; Fung 2003; Gastil and Levine 2005; Guttman and Thompson 1996; Smith and Wales 1999]. According to these approaches, regulated micro spheres may reproduce the pre-conditions for the authentic deliberation lacking in contemporary democracies [Bohman 1998; Dryzek 2000; Elster 1997; Habermas 1992]: freedom and equality among participants, their orientation towards the common good rather than personal interest, their willingness to "reason together" rather than engage in instrumental bargaining and therefore their readiness to have their opinion changed by the "power of the better argument," and their preference for consensus-based solutions.

In other words, because it is extremely difficult to promote deliberative practices on a large scale, the task of revitalizing the public sphere is mainly assigned to small groups of citizens, *minipopuli*[2] (socio-demographic representation) [Goodin and Dryzek 2006] or *mini-publics* (representation of different point of views) [Fung 2003; Fung 2005]. The arenas created by means of the random-sampling method are considered those best able to approximate the deliberative ideal. These arenas are temporary and artificial, and they consist of lay, non partisan citizens. They should thus minimize the instrumentality deriving from both previous relationships among the participants and their consolidated preferences. In particular, the random-sampling procedure is deemed to have the advantage of "counteracting mechanisms of social and political distinction" [Röcke and Sintomer 2006, 91]. By seeking to include ordinary citizens, the construction of *minipopuli* excludes those who are most active, motivated, and competent on controversial issues. Because such citizens are partisan, they are deemed less willing to abandon their convictions and may therefore impair the deliberation's authenticity [Goodin and Dryzek 2006; Hendriks, Dryzek and Hunold 2007; Smith 2000]. Deliberative arenas of stakeholders formed mainly by using the 'open door' method may function quite differently from neo-corporatist arenas thanks to specific rules defining their internal workings and which establish individual direct rather than delegated participation as the criterion for inclusion. By contrast, deliberative arenas which mix stakeholders and competent or partisan citizens with a random sample of lay and ordinary citizens are more difficult contexts for deliberation owing to the cognitive, motivational and power asymmetries among the participants [Bobbio 2007b; Hendriks 2008].

[2] *Minipopuli* – a term coined by Dahl [1985] – are samples which reflect certain socio-demographic characteristics of the population, or the principle of exemplarity of the points of view [Carson 2008; Fishkin and Luskin 2000; Fung 2003; Goodin and Dryzek 2006]. An important difference between Dahl's *minipopuli* and the microcosms proposed by contemporary deliberativists concerns the temporal extension: according to Dahl, this should be wide and with long pauses between meetings; on the contrary, deliberative experiments like town meetings, deliberative polls, and citizens' juries are much more concentrated.

In the new institutional arenas, deliberation formally takes place among "individuals-citizens." However, there is an invisible and profoundly asymmetric relationship between the institutions as 'owners of the process' [Baccaro and Papadakis 2009; Lowndes, Pratchett and Stoker 2001] and citizens more or less atomized according to whether they have been randomly selected or whether they are stakeholders and self-organized networks of activists. The endeavour to produce authentic discursive processes must finally deal with modalities (participant selection and working methods) and agendas whose setting is varyingly controlled by the promoters and tends to be compatible with their needs and goals. The institutional regulation of the new arenas inevitably affects, though to different extents, their inclusiveness – which is pre-condition itself for their democratic legitimacy.

The deep-lying causes of political exclusion, and therefore of the weakness of deliberative conditions in contemporary democracies, are not ignored by the deliberative perspective adopting the procedural-institutional approach. A series of factors – such as colonization of the public sphere and the political institutions by the logic of the market, growing social polarization, "political poverty" [Bohman 1996, 123], socio-cultural power relations, the insufficient and unsatisfactory circulation of elites, political corruption – provoke political exclusion and thus heavily affect the opportunities and capacities of citizens to participate in an inclusive deliberative process. The precise purpose of deliberative techniques is to retroact on deficits of 'background equality' [Fung 2005] through selective inclusion in intensive discursive arenas consisting of the actors affected by the decisions at stake, and then by means of an incrementally diffused cultural change and the progressive "colonization" of liberal institutions [Fung and Wright 2001, 23].

In practice, however, this deliberative strategy may underestimate the capacity of the dominant actors and institutions to make innovation comply with their inner logics – as many, even very different, theoretical studies have often stressed [Barber 1984; Benhabib 1996; Dryzek 2000; Mouffe 1999; Pellizzoni 2001; Sanders 1997; Walzer 1999; Young 2001]. For instance, Parkinson [2003, 191] notes: "So-called deliberative processes like citizens' juries, deliberative polls and consensus conferences have not arisen pure from deliberative theory or popular imagination like Venus from the waves – they are embedded in a liberal, not a deliberative system, and are fundamentally affected by the assumptions, motivations, discourses and power structures of that system."

This is particularly pertinent to deliberative practices managed by institutional actors, and in regard to which many of the most radical criticisms brought against deliberative theory seem especially incisive. The disciplining of language, and a rational, universalistic and consensus-based orientation, may be the most subtle and elitist

forms of exclusion engendered by the proceduralization of the new institutional deliberative arenas open to citizens [Cohen 1989; Sanders 1997; Saward 2000; Young 1997]. Deliberative rules are supposed to be moral and rational, but in fact they are affected by the priorities and modalities selected by the dominant actors, so that the controversial nature of political discussion is blunted [Mouffe 1999; Young 2001]. Also the distinction between negotiated-instrumental and communicative-deliberative logic, between aggregation and integration, is blurred in communicative and political praxis by the pluralism of the actors' values, interests and linguistic strategies [Hendriks 2008; Knight and Johnson 1994; Neblo 2005; Prezworski 1998]. Moreover, the notion of strategic deliberation – that is to say, the instrumental use of discourse – seems to annul the theory's specificity by excessively widening its semantic range [Neblo 2007; Steiner 2008; Thompson 2008]. Finally, the space of deliberation appears to be extremely residual in the political sphere [Walzer 1999]. Rather, the new deliberative procedures display a more or less explicit anti-political bias which negates the specificity of the political embedded in the unilateral definition of the framing of both specific questions and forms of participation [Mouffe 1999; Walzer 1999]. At the same time, science and technics have become central factors in the legitimization of public policies. Conflicts are thus ascribed to differences in knowledge and deficits of communication, rather than to alternative or incompatible visions of the world or to structural causes/roots [Beck 1986; Mattelart 2001; Pellizzoni 2001].

Accordingly, for many critics the notion that the question of political inclusion can be resolved through adoption of *ad hoc* deliberative procedures promoted by institutions and addressed to citizens seems unrealistic, futile or perverse, regardless of the actors' intentionality [Pellizzoni 2005]. Indeed, the crux of the question is clear in the strand of deliberative theory most sceptical about the institutionalization of new arenas [Habermas 1992]. The persistence of social conflicts and their political consequences are responsible for the problematic relationship between new deliberative arenas 'controlled' by the institutions and the public sphere [Bohman 1996; Cohen and Rogers 2003; Dryzek 2000; Fung and Wright 2003]; a relationship manifest in a tension between the institutional agenda and the oppositional public sphere, or between "mini-publics" and "counter-publics" [Carson 2008].

Institutional political actors tend to choose their interlocutors from among the least challenging, apathetic or isolated citizens, while they discard the most vociferous and critical, self-organized and conflictual groups. For that matter, subjects with the greatest power resources are often reluctant to accept the rules of arenas which reduce their relative advantages, and where, for example, they may be challenged on equal terms by actors that they do not even recognize [Hendriks 2006a]. The legitimacy of liberal institutions, already threatened by the post-democratic redefini-

tion of the relationships between the economic and political spheres, is contested by movements, organized citizens, and new forms of participation which penetrate social relationships and the public sphere regardless of political or media-driven intermediation (subpolitics, consumerism, media activism). In many contexts these forms of participation are regarded by institutional actors as much more serious challenges than the generic political apathy and disengagement of citizens.

However, the instituzionalization of new deliberative practices seems to guarantee citizens neither influence on decisions nor greater transparency, nor the curbing of manipulation [Papadopoulos and Warin 2007b, 597]. Even the level of publicity – a controversial aspect in deliberative theory – is generally very inadequate. Access to deliberative arenas by third parties (independent researchers and journalists, or excluded subjects), and opportunities to discuss the results publicly, are so restricted that activists view deliberation as "primarily an activity of political elites who treat one another with cordial respect and try to work out their differences" [Young 2001, 677]. Although some interesting results have been achieved in terms of increased awareness and information levels of the participant citizens [Delli Carpini, Cook and Jacobs 2004], the impact of such deliberative experiments on political-institutional processes has often proved to perform a predominantly symbolic function in "a renewed and more sophisticated, strategy of consensus building" [Della Porta 2008, 21]. This strategy seems to be founded on matching deliberative practices with the diffusion of new public management in the current forms of governance [Chiamparino 2007; Freschi 2007; Papadopoulos and Warin 2007b; Parkinson 2004; Sintomer and de Maillard 2007].

The proliferation of new institutional deliberative arenas may be better understood by examining the relationship between the adoption of these new methods and their political context [Delli Carpini, Cook and Jacobs 2004, 499; Papadopoulos and Warin 2007b; Thompson 2008]. Some scholars propose models of analysis which focus not only on the internal functioning of these new devices but also on their external conditions: that is to say mainly on the relationship between the public sphere and the political-institutional context [Abelson and Gauvin 2006; Edwards *et al.* 2008; Fung 2003; Rowe and Frewer 2004]. However, empirical efforts of this kind are still relatively rare [Andersen and Hansen 2007; Baccaro and Papadakis 2009; Button and Mattson 1999; Chiamparino 2007; Dryzek and Tucker 2008; Hendriks 2006a; Lowndes, Pratchett and Stoker 2001; Sintomer and de Maillard 2007; Tucker 2008]. For example, the importance of the role performed by political elites is acknowledged [Fung and Wright 2001, 34-35], but empirical analysis of the relationship between new deliberative arenas and representative ones seems insufficiently developed in regard to their specific political contexts. Now required is not just contextualized

analysis of the origins, construction, and results of the new arenas, as well as of their relationships with decisional ones [Papadopoulos and Warin 2007b, 600]; also necessary is investigation of their meaning in the more general frame of ongoing political changes: for the "deliberativization" of public policies is proceeding in parallel with the development of processes in reverse ("contradictory shifts for our democracy"), such as presidentalization and the increasing weight of decisional arenas outside democratic control [ibid., 602].

Research Subject and Approach

In recent years, institutional deliberative processes[3] have begun to be adopted in Italy as well, mainly by centre-left local governments. Italian democracy has always been characterized by political fragmentation, high electoral turnouts, a low level of citizens' interest in political information, a quasi-monopolistic mass media system, a digital divide wider than in the other European democracies, and a civil society highly mobilized both locally and at European and global level. After the political upheavals of the early 1990s and the profound social and cultural changes of the previous decade, the centre-right restructured itself around both Berlusconi's neo-populist and media-driven politics and localist parties. The centre-left parties[4] began a difficult search for new symbolic strategies, often imitating those of their main competitor, and for new organization forms able to replace their previously solid and effective bureaucratic-territorial structures. The search intensified in the mid-1990s, when the centre-left turned to civil society to recruit the municipal political class; but this strategy was soon abandoned for a general re-partitization of local government [Catanzaro *et al*. 2002; Vandelli 1997] and a growing 'bipartisan' adoption of a rhetoric centred on 'innovations' that enabled joint "administration with citizens" [Bobbio 2004].

The empirical literature on Italian institutional deliberative experiments – which have often arisen from pilot partnership projects conducted jointly by institu-

[3] For a review of participatory-deliberative experiments in Italy see [Bobbio 2007a; Bobbio and Pomatto 2007; Pecoriello and Rispoli 2006; Ravazzi 2007b]. In Italy the success of deliberative democracy among local administrators was preceded by the introduction of Participative Budgets [PBs], which spread in Europe in the wave of the South American experience. PBs experiments in the very different European political and social contexts encountered a series of difficulties, especially in regard to the self-selection of participants [Sintomer, Herzberg and Rocke 2008].

[4] In recent decades, the centre-left has undergone a series of political transformations: from the historical *Partito Comunista Italiano* (PCI), which was disbanded to create the *Partito Democratico della Sinistra* (PDS), followed by *Democratici di Sinistra* (DS) and finally, after merging with the centre party *Margherita*, the *Partito Democratico* (PD).

tions and researchers – mainly focuses on the *internal functioning* of deliberative devices and on the question of preference transformation, which is taken as the crucial indicator of the deliberation's quality [Bobbio 2007b; Giannetti and Lewanski 2006; Isernia *et al.* 2008; Ravazzi 2007a]. The relationship between power asymmetries among participants and preference transformation has been rarely addressed. This literature, in our view, quite unrealistically considers the properties of preferences as largely independent from the distribution of power among participants, and from both the specific and wider interactive settings, as if they concerned a de-socialized and de-politicized actor [Mutz 2008]. Hence, the data available on the social and political profiles of participants – or in other words on background equality conditions – are limited and lacking in detail. Although the Italian debate on the new deliberative institutional arenas widely acknowledges their limitations and ambiguities [Bobbio 2005; Della Porta 2008; Giannetti 2007; Pellizzoni 2005; Pellizzoni 2007; Ravazzi 2007b; Regonini 2005], it still lacks in-depth empirical analysis on several intertwined aspects, such as the context of deliberative institutional initiatives, the relationship between these arenas and the wider public sphere, and the role of both political elites and civil society groups.

This article analyses the first two experiments conducted by the regional government of Tuscany in 2006 and in 2007 on the basis of two events termed 'Electronic Town Meetings' (ETMs). ETM is a deliberative method [Lukensmeyer and Brigham 2005] which seeks to combine the advantages of small-group debate with those deriving from the involvement of a larger number of citizens. For one or two days, a number of citizens varying from some hundreds to some thousands are divided into groups of about ten people to discuss a more or less detailed agenda of issues at separate tables. By means of network-connected computers, the results of the individual discussions are collected by a team responsible for aggregating and reporting them to the participants; these latter are then invited to vote on questions related to the issues discussed.

The two ETMs differed in various respects.[5] The purpose of the 2006 event (ETM1) was to define general guidelines for a regional bill on participation (*Legge*

[5] Both ETMs lasted for one day: ETM1 took place on 18 November 2006, ETM2 on 17 November 2007. In both cases the discussion was organized around tables of 9-10 participants. These events were investigated by using a mixture of research techniques. A structured questionnaire was administered to the participants, and it was compiled by around 50% of those taking part in the ETM1 discussion (n=200), and by around 80% of ETM2 (n=156). In addition, both events were studied using participant and non-participant observation. In 2006 ETM observation was carried out by a research group formed of 13 researchers, while in 2007 the group consisted of 26 researchers. The research work lasted from January 2006 to November 2008, and it included: 3 focus groups and interviews with grassroots groups and association members, local and regional administrators; press reviews and

regionale sulla partecipazione).[6] The 2007 event (ETM2) addressed the issue of "*Citizens' participation in health spending: Healthcare charges: yes or no?*," a budget item representing less than 1.8% of the regional health fund [Regione Toscana 2007a, 7]. The first issue therefore had a broader, almost 'constituent' significance, and was relatively new for experiments of this kind given its reflexive character. Healthcare policy, as discussed by the 2007 event, is instead a more typical object of institutional deliberative practices [Fung 2005; Lowndes, Pratchett and Stoker 2001; Parkinson 2004].[7] The two experiments also differed in the methods used to select the participants, and in the number of the latter. The first ETM was attended by nearly 400 citizens, the majority of whom had enrolled voluntarily. About 200 citizens, instead selected by random sampling, took part in the second ETM. Also the deliberative settings differed. ETM1 took place in just one location (Carrara), while the second event was organized in one main location (Carrara) and in nine secondary locations around the region. Finally, although ETM2 had the same label, it was more similar to a typical deliberative poll because of the presence of experts who discussed the issue before the citizens' opinions were polled.[8] The second experiment took place

analysis of official documents; observation of public events organized by groups, associations and Tuscany Region relative to ETM1 and to the presentation of the results from the two experiments.

[6] Regional law no. 69 was approved by the Regional Council in December 2007, one month after ETM2, with abstentions or votes against by centre-right parties (*Forza Italia* and *Alleanza Nazionale*). This law establishes two forms of participation: a regional one modelled on the French *débat public*, and a local one for local communities. It also provides measures to support these processes until 2012, with a yearly investment of around 1 million Euros for 2008. The measures envisaged are training schemes and support for organization and communication. The main implementing instruments are: 1) the creation of a Participation Authority (*Autorità garante della partecipazione*), a monocratic body appointed by the Regional Council; 2) an agreement between the Region and the local governments obliging the latter to suspend the adoption or implementation of administrative acts which may nullify the participation processes in progress, to take cognizance of the outcomes of participation, and to publicize the reasons for choices possibly not congruent with such outcomes; 3) a training programme, in cooperation with universities, especially addressed to participation practitioners. Besides local governments and groups of citizens, also private subjects, citizens and enterprises may develop a participative scheme, but in this case a citizens' petition in favour of the request is necessary. The regional government has launched a first set of 28 local participation projects financed by the new regional law with a total amount of 928.000 Euros. For the complete list of projects see: http://www.regione.toscana.it/regione/export/RT/sito-RT/Contenuti/sezioni/diritti/partecipazione. For the official documents about the two ETMs, see http://www.regione.toscana.it/partecipazione.

[7] The distinction between types of deliberation issues is a controversial topic of discussion for theoretical deliberativists, from Habermas to Rawls. On this see, for example, [Cohen and Rogers 2003; Guttman and Thompson 1996].

[8] The first Italian ETM was held in Turin (22 September 2005), with the aim of promoting a world youth meeting on the occasion of the 2006 Winter Olympic Games. Two important deliberative polls took place in Turin (24-25 March 2007) on infrastructural issues, and in Rome (3 December 2006) on the regional health programme. For further information, see http://cdd.stanford.edu/polls/italy/index.html.

a year after the first one, and since then has become a sort of yearly ritual (a third ETM was held in 2008): their promoters have explicitly considered them as serving to institutionalize similar deliberative practices. This study thus examines the first stage of this process which developed in concomitance with a distinctive phase of relationships among local political actors.

Tuscany is a region with a long tradition of centre-left local governments almost unbeatable in elections – indeed, it has been described as having a leftist "red political subculture" [Caciagli 1993; Trigilia 1986]. The political class governing Tuscany is one of the most stable in the country, and for this reason it has a rather important role at national level as well, despite the absence of large cities in the region. However, also in Tuscany, the political changes of the 1990s induced increasing grassroots initiatives which contested the outcomes of a neo-corporatist governance constantly weaker in terms of bottom-up legitimation and more attentive to private interests. Protests and the introduction of participative instruments such as law proposals or *referenda* launched by citizens, or legal actions, failed to gain any significant influence on public decision-making. Autonomous electoral lists (civic or formed of dissidents from the main party) were organized, and they sometimes forced, in a two-ballot electoral system, a second ballot on candidates who otherwise would have certainly been elected in the first round with majorities of more than 50%. As the political elite of the main party, Tuscan civil society also exerts a certain influence at national level, because of its contribution to criticism of Berlusconism and its endeavour to aggregate Leftist groups opposed to the moderate turn of the major left party.

To sum up, the context of our two case-studies is characterized firstly by the permanence of a centre-left political elite within an Italian political panorama dominated by the spectacularization and trivialization of politics and by a highly concentrated mass media system. Secondly, there is in Tuscany a strong oppositional public sphere, though neglected by the mainstream media, which is highly critical of the workings and results of local governance, and able to put forward technical and political counter-proposals, and ready to act in the legal arena as well. Thirdly, Tuscany has witnessed a contradiction between the regional government's adoption of deliberativist rhetoric and its constant resistance to the initiatives of citizens aggregated in grassroots groups or engaged in referendum campaigns and voter initiatives. To gain better understanding of the political significance of the adoption of new deliberative devices by institutional actors, we sought to take account of the general political tendencies characterizing the local (and national) context, thus going beyond the limited context of the building of the two new arenas.

We focused on three main empirical problems: *a*) political inclusion/exclusion, by observing both the construction of the arena, i.e. the relationship between the

public sphere and the micro sphere of deliberation, and the political profiles of participants;[9] *b*) the effectiveness of the deliberative device adopted in promoting 'authentic' discursive processes; *c*) political-institutional effects, such as the impact on decision-making processes, and other lateral political functions equally important for the actors involved. The first aspect is of crucial importance for the possibility itself of inclusive deliberation: a process of authentic dialogue occurring within an elite (selection through access) sharing a common perspective on the world's problems (selection through agenda framing) would not be sufficient to make a significant difference with respect to more common elitist political practices.[10]

The Political Context

Italian democracy has a consolidated consociative tradition, and in the past fifteen years it has following a trend common to the Western democracies by moving towards a marked presidentialization [Poguntke and Webb 2005]. The strengthening of the executive to the detriment of legislative power has occurred not only at the state level but also at all the other territorial levels: provinces, regions and municipalities. An important factor in this process has been the introduction of the direct election of the mayors and chief executives of provinces in 1993, and of regions in 1995. Moreover, in the past decade, a devolution of powers from the centre to the periphery has been to the benefit of regions and their administrators in terms of political weight. This strengthening of local governments may thus significantly influence political career paths: more than in the past, experience as a local administrator may be the gateway to a prominent political career at national level.

At the beginning of the 1990s, the Italian political system underwent a crisis without equal in the Western democracies [Modern Italy 2007; West European Politics 1997]. The collapse of the ideologies that had characterized the Italian party

[9] There are few empirical studies on deliberative experiments which consider the participants' political preferences in regard to the representation arena: see, for example [Gastil, Burkhalter and Black 2007] on juries in municipal criminal courts, or [Cuesta *et al.* 2008] on constructing samples for deliberative polls. In some cases, such as the one that we studied, information on the participants' political profiles may be of key importance in explaining the political meaning of these experiments.

[10] Our empirical analysis did not focus especially on micro indicators – often used in the analysis of the *internal functioning* of a wide variety of potentially deliberative situations – such as the participants's perceived degree of satisfaction and self-efficacy, and other effects such as increased information, motivation, social capital, polarization, the mix between particularist and universalist issues, or in other words, common-good-oriented issues, rational or emotional, emerging from the discussion. An important branch of research on deliberation in formal and informal contexts has synthesized the majority of indicators relative to participants' interaction into a "discourse quality index" [Steiner *et al.* 2004] through measures of distance and proximity to the deliberative ideal.

system (dominated by a strong communist party and a strong popular-catholic party), accompanied by political scandals, the state's financial crisis, the Mafia's 'strategy of fear', and the advance of northern localist parties, initiated a phase of political transition characterized by: *a*) the dismantling and reconstruction of the party system; *b*) the transition of Italian democracy towards a majoritarian and presidential system; *c*) an anti-political shift in political culture.

The disappearance or profound renewal of the parties on which the First Republic had been based and their replacement with new political groups accelerated the cartelization of parties [Katz and Mair 1995] and the personalization and the presidentialization of politics [Calise 2006; Legnante 1999]. In Italy as in other countries, this transformation of political parties has led to a progressive weakening of the "party on the ground" and a parallel strengthening of the "party in public office" and the "party in central office" [Katz and Mair 2002].

In response to their profound loss of legitimation, political parties have in recent years offered their members and supporters broader spaces for participation, involving them directly in the selection of candidates and the definition of policies [Bille 2001; Kittilson and Scarrow 2003]. In Italy, for example, in recent years the centre-left has frequently resorted to primary elections to select its candidates as mayors, presidents of a province, governors of a region, and also as leader of the coalition and, thus, as Prime Minister [Pasquino and Venturino 2009]. However, in most cases, these have been individualized and atomized forms of participation and hence with very weak impacts. Although party membership is diminishing in all Western democracies [Mair and van Biezen 2001; Scarrow 2000], it is still considered to be an important resource, principally because of its function in legitimating the elite [Scarrow 1996, 42]. By contrast, activists and the middle-level elite are increasingly marginalized because they are usually highly critical of the party leadership's choices and actions [Scarrow 2000]. The formal extolling of this atomized participation, on one hand, and the substantial exclusion of the most motivated activists on the other, generate plebiscitary dynamics [Ignazi 2004, 340] that emphasize the personalized nature of parties [Calise 2000] and foster hostility against them. In short, also in Italy, the parties have progressively abandoned their "identifying representation" function for "efficient representation" in the administration of power [Pizzorno 1996]. This transformation has been accompanied by intense patronage [Blondel 2002] which has distributed selective incentives in order to ensure the "preservation" of the political class. In Italy this has been achieved through the control of key places in the new networks of production and distribution of public-interest goods and services for which there is large and stable demand (such as transport, energy, water, communications, waste disposal, etc.).

If we consider the transformations of citizens' political culture, it is evident that socio-demographic factors can no longer be used to predict with accuracy either Italians' voting intentions or their party political preferences. Electoral loyalty becomes increasingly "weightless" [Natale 2002]; identification with parties follows a trend common to the Western democracies by drastically diminishing [Maraffi 2002, 315; Schmitt 2009, 80]; and the feature shared by most citizens is hostility towards politicians and parties [Mastropaolo 2005; Mete 2005; Mete 2010].

More recently, since the general elections of 2008, the particularistic and individualistic shift in Italian politics has become clearer. Much more than in the past, the activity of the political class seems predicated on the defence of the territorial interests that it represents. This is the principal explanation for the success of *Lega Nord* in northern Italy and of *Movimento per l'Autonomia* in Sicily. Proposals intended to meet particularistic regional demands have also been advanced by the centre-left (for example the proposed creation of a northern Democratic party as a viable alternative to the centre-right, the strongest coalition in this territorial area). Since the 1990s local governance has broadened the array of actors involved, owing to the crisis of representation suffered by both parties and interest organizations [Catanzaro *et al.* 2002; Magnatti *et al.* 2004; Paci 2008]. This has also happened in areas governed by left-wing majorities, where the neo-corporatist model of governance performed a major role in local development until the end of the 1990s, followed by a progressive loss of consensus.

In this frame, Tuscany is characterized both by widespread forms of concertation, in which, however, dirigistic tendencies have emerged, for example in the case of territorial pacts [Freschi 2001; Ramella and Piselli 2008], and by varyingly structured forms of self-organization critical of the methods and results of concertation. In effect, the regional Tuscan government is one of those most responsive to the instances of civil society and movements: since the first European Social Forum (2002), it has promoted yearly events on the issues of globalization, common goods and the environment. Citizens' participation has been included in Tuscany's new regional statute, which devotes one of its nine main titles to the matter. The need to enhance citizens' participation was included in the electoral and government programme launched in 2005.

Nevertheless, crucial infrastructural questions, such as the TAV,[12] privatization of the water supply, or environmental protection, have provoked large-scale social mobilization and conflict between the regional government and a broad network of

[12] TAV stands for '*Treno ad Alta Velocità*' (high-speed train). This is a new railway traversing the Apennines and connecting Tuscany and Emilia-Romagna in central Italy.

actors (legal arenas or institutes of democratic representation, as in the case the bill proposed by popular initiative against privatization of the water supply[13]). In Tuscany there are more than 160 grassroots groups organizations grouped into a regional network. These groups apply pressure on the political class, at different territorial levels, and produce tensions in the multilevel concertation system. Given their organization, issues (such as the common good) and field of action, these initiatives cannot be wholly categorized as NIMBY phenomena [Della Porta 2004; Della Porta and Piazza 2008]. Instead of being symbols of particularization and the weakening of social capital [Floridia 2008; Ramella 2006], these groups often testify to the re-emergence of forms of public commitment and a concern for legality.

If the political class governing Tuscany has appeared less vulnerable to the turmoil of the past two decades, more recently there has emerged an undergoing erosion of its electoral basis, with uncertainties concerning its resilience. The possible advent of political alternatives drawing on the same sub-cultural bases, and the risk of the dispersion of consensus due to loss of grip over less politically active citizens, are the current challenges faced by local and regional centre-left governments. The ruling class has attempted to reorganize itself through the promotion of institutional and electoral reforms, pursuing the re-centralization of the party control over selection of the political class [Pacini 2007; Profeti 2005; Turi 2007] which has traditionally been very strong [Baccetti 2005; Cerruto 2008].[14] The inclusion on the political-institutional agenda of a proposed bill on participation[15] is explicitly intended to create new channels for the expression of political demands by individual citizens, as well as to combat the alleged particularization of grassroots groups. The new deliberative arenas – *ad hoc*, agile and without organizational impact on the party elite – allow relations to be maintained with individual citizens and avoid the awkward constraints of delegation and representation. Enabling citizens once again to participate actively and constantly in party activities is not only very difficult and laborious in the current circumstances, given the scant credit that ordinary citizens pay to political parties; it may also give rise to awkward requests for inclusion in decisions concerning programmes and in selection of the political class. It may therefore entail control or com-

[13] Rejected by the Regional Council on 22 November 2006, a few days after the ETM, the proposal gathered about 43,000 signatures.

[14] The recent reform of the Tuscan electoral system (2004) introduced "blocked lists" for the election of town councillors and envisaged primary elections for the selection of candidates. This further strengthened the regional parties' hold over their peripheries.

[15] Since the beginning of the discussion, the institutional proponents suggested the introduction of organizational and financial support for local participative processes, also in the form of training programmes. This support, guaranteed by the newly-enacted Law no.69, will be allocated after the adequacy of participative processes has been certified by the monocratic Authority on participation.

petition in the management of power. Participation by citizens, externalized from the party structure and individual, *ad hoc*, limited in time, uncoupled from a continuous relationship, enlarges the margins of action available to leaders in agenda setting and determining the modes and rules of access to the decisional arena.

Construction of the Two Arenas

ETM1. A Discussion Within Leftist "Participative Elites"

The institutional process for enactment of a law on participation began a few months after the new elected regional government took office in 2005. The regional Councillor for participation – for long a leading player in the party machine and the main promoter of the adoption of primaries by the left-wing majority party in Tuscany – identified the origins of the initiative in the social and political changes of the 1990s, and in the "search for new channels of relationship with citizens, different from those furnished by the mass media," this being the model deployed in Italy by Berlusconi. "The ideological impetus to participation as a means of protest against a model of development" imparted by alter-globalist social movements (Interview with the Councillor for Participation) has been taken up in order to remedy the inability to channel consensus and political demands from which the dominant party was also beginning to suffer. An important role in the preliminary discussion, mostly in the phase of activating groups and individuals in the community and drafting the *Guida del partecipante* [Participant Guide] – the document discussed at the ETM – was performed by the *Rete Nuovo Municipio*, a national association with deep roots in Tuscany. This association was of crucial importance in linking the Italian debate on local government innovation with the discussion begun at Porto Alegre,[16] and it was seen as guaranteeing the initiative's institutional credibility among the self-organized citizens' groups.

From the outset, the regional government opted for a participative setting open to all interested parties, and for maintenance of its full autonomy in choice of the devices to adopt.[17] The idea of drafting a bill on participation sparked fierce debate

[16] The members of the association are public bodies, administrators and consultants, all pioneers of experimentation with participation practices in local public decisions, such as participatory budgeting.

[17] In January 2006 the councillorship promoted a public meeting which was attended by about 300 persons (administrators, associations and grassroots groups). Organized in June was an international workshop where the final choice of a town meeting was announced. During the summer, before the ETM, nine local meetings were organized with restricted participation and the recurrent presence of a limited number of experts.

and serious concerns in a local civil society actively engaged with issues of public service privatization, and crucial infrastructural and environmental questions, through action in the public oppositional sphere and recourse to consolidated institutes of direct democracy embodied in representative institutions (such as referendums and law proposals launched by citizens), or to legal arenas. This was a heterogeneous group of social actors with very different political resources: exponents of the parties on the radical left (in 2005 not included in the government coalition, but present in many Tuscan municipalities with councillors for participation, who mediated with local movements and self-organized citizens); associations representing the so-called "reflexive middle classes;" and spokespersons from grassroots groups. When the regional government decided to adopt the ETM as a deliberative-participative instrument, it caused rifts among these actors. The Region publicly justified its decision on the grounds that it was necessary to overcome the particularistic instances of the grassroots groups and to foster individual participation by ordinary citizens.

The section of Tuscan civil society which decided, albeit with some scepticism, to participate in the discussion so that it could influence the content of the law was aware that the concentration of discussion into a one-day workshop might "sterilize citizens' participation" (Focus Florence 2).[18] As well as the degree of inclusiveness (in terms of both pluralism and openness of the agenda), also the adoption of a self-inclusion strategy in order to exert control, to advance proposals and not "be shut out of" the discussion, had implications for the discursive modalities of the deliberative arena.

For the conflictual actors, access to the institutions implied a risk of co-option, neutralization, and a curbing of their emancipatory potential [Benhabib 1996; Dryzek 1990; Dryzek 2000; Fung 2005; Young 2001]. A large part of civil society – particularly the grassroots organizations that settled the most conflict-laden disputes with the Tuscan local public bodies – after taking part in the preliminary phases proposed by the regional government, withdrew from the discussion, criticising it as limited, evasive, and lacking credibility because of its total lack of institutional responses to the past and current demands made by self-organized groups of citizens (Focus Florence 2). As a consequence no agreement was reached on the principles or the "acceptability of the agenda" [Young 2001, 683]. "In the present conditions the discussion on participation proposed by the Tuscany Region seems no more than a rhetorical device, some kind of trap, which may prove only functional to the pursuit

[18] Many of these subjects close to the institutional sphere (parties, associations, universities) subsequently helped found the national association *Per una Sinistra Unita e Plurale*, inspired by the movements of the past decade and the social forums that had protested against the policies of the Berlusconi governments.

or maintenance of ambiguous and not authentically democratic policies (Open Letter – press release by IDRA,[19] 25 September 2006).

The regional Councillor cited what he claimed were more far-sighted reasons for his decision not to start such an experiment on an issue on which civil society had already mobilized. Political space for the institutionalization of participation would only be possible if it was "uncoupled from the current political conjuncture" with its vested interests, and from the "temporary distraction of the machines of the moderate parties." According to the Councillor, the gap evident in Tuscany, as well, between the rhetoric and practices of the political class, between the demand for participation and the willingness to grant it, would be reduced with the adoption of the new law. Nevertheless, because the bill's proponents were the same institutional actors who refused to engage in direct dialogue with the self-organized citizens, the logic of the choice made by the regional government was interpreted by the grassroots groups as an attempt to disempower bottom-up participation, with risks similar to those already experienced with the institution of councillorships for participation, which had proved to be further filters between citizens and administrators. As the grassroots organizations put it, the councillorships for participation "exonerated the other councillors from concerning themselves with any real participation" (Focus Florence 2). The new participative processes introduced by the local institutions appeared at best to be ways to "bureaucratize protest" (Focus Pistoia). Hence, the decision by these groups not to take part in the discussion was not due to fears of co-option, but rather to disagreement with the issue on the agenda, as has been found by other studies [Hendriks 2008, 1018]. Although these social actors decided to withdraw from the ETM, they submitted their own draft bill, which has never subsequently been either published on the Region's website[20] or included by the promoters on the Town Meeting agenda.

The choices between *exit* and *voice* made by the various components of civil society can be explained by their different types of conflict (direct or indirect, more or less focused), their different sources of political influence (access to the media, supra-local networks, institutional connections, etc.) related to short- and medium-term political opportunities. These choices therefore resulted from a strategic and comparative evaluation of the costs and benefits deriving from entry to or exit from

[19] IDRA is a Florentine association which has campaigned against the TAV for more than a decade. According to IDRA, the initiative of the public administration could only acquire credibility if the contested infrastructural works were halted and administrative transparency assured.

[20] The proposal by the grassroots groups centred on strengthening the information and response obligations by local public bodies in regard to citizens. The draft can be downloaded from the IDRA website. http://associazioni.comune.firenze.it/idra.

these new arenas [Baccaro and Papadakis 2009; Hendriks 2006b; Young 2001]. For the subjects engaged in focused conflicts and with independent organizational resources, access to participative arenas regulated by the institutions may not be beneficial, because it may shift organizational and human resources to other-directed agendas and procedures; or it may be detrimental to investments made in other arenas, such as legal action or alternative information and communication practices in the public sphere (Focus Florence 2).

The institutional communication campaign conceived the new participation scheme as a crucial means with which to address less politically active citizens, and to counterbalance/neutralize the veto power exerted by grassroots groups. Nevertheless, the entire discussion took place in a context of selective publicity restricted to insiders. The issue chosen and scant investment in communication did not lead to greater inclusiveness even in the recruitment of ordinary citizens – the political target emphasized by the institutional promoters – given that the main method for the selection of participants was enrolment "open to all Tuscan inhabitants of majority age."[21] Little use was made of online digital media: the new opportunities for information and dialogue with experts, other citizens (involved or otherwise in the ETM), and institutions were not exploited. Publicity for the preliminary meetings was seldom timely and widespread, and it failed to gather a new public (other than the regional executive's usual partner associative networks), so that an activist exclaimed: "I knew everyone by sight!" (Focus Florence 2). Even the recruitment of a small group of randomly selected citizens (20 out of 30 who accepted the invitation to participate) was very difficult.

In short, construction of the arena with its different components (issue, participants and methods) was in fact determined by the proponent institution. The issue selected did not reflect a specific conflict within civil society, but rather the internal needs of the political-institutional arena, in particular those of the ruling party. No attempts were made to undertake either positive outreach actions to prevent self-exclusion [Dryzek and Tucker 2008; Hendriks, Dryzek and Hunold 2007; Podziba 2006] – which was even encouraged by the rigid positions taken up publicly by the institutional promoters against the more conflictual groups – or information campaigns to overcome the predictable scant interest of ordinary citizens in the issue selected.

[21] A survey of press releases on the first and the second ETM reveals a clear emphasis on inclusiveness as the main feature of both events. For the first the releases highlighted that the ETM would decide the guidelines for the bill on participation; for the second, they stressed that the results of the ETM would not be binding on the administration's decisions.

The ETM2. A Certain Idea of Participation: The Administration in Search of Consensus On a Non-issue

The topic of the second ETM – the contribution by citizens to health spending – was defined by the regional administration. Public health, one of the pillars of the Italian welfare system, is the largest sector of public expenditure and the most important in regional policy; it is also crucial for relations with citizens, associations, self-help groups, private service enterprises and unions. Since the 1990s the pressure for the curbing of public spending has forced the Tuscan administration to reorganize, downsize and outsource numerous services to private for-profit or non-profit organizations. In parallel, the demand for services by citizens has changed and diversified: new needs (such as prevention, alternative medicines, new food risks, mental disorders and new addictions, family mediations and new parenting models, etc.), and new subjects (singles, immigrants, the chronically ill, etc.) have emerged. Defining local solutions and creating synergies with diverse partners have become essential. A crucial aspect of this process has been reorganization of the hospital network, which is the mainstay of the local system of services.

The second town meeting took place while the bill on participation was being debated in the Regional Council. The organization of a second deliberative meeting, based wholly on the recruitment of all participants by means of random sampling, appeared to respond to criticisms raised in the local political debate concerning the low-involvement of ordinary citizens in the first ETM. At the same time, repeating the deliberative experience seemed to strengthen the legitimacy of the regional government's bill under discussion by the Council. Nevertheless, not all the majority parties, which in the meantime had been joined by *Rifondazione Comunista* (Radical Left), agreed with the choice of topic and the device used, which had several features of a deliberative poll. The topic selected for the ETM discussion was largely irrelevant to citizens. It was also irrelevant to the more structural regional priorities for public health addressed through new forms of the participatory planning of services envisaged by national and regional legislation and launched in Tuscany by means of the *Società della Salute*, these being mixed public/private bodies.[22] The president of

[22] This framework is defined by the national law 328/2000, which provides for involvement of the third sector (i.e. voluntary associations and social cooperatives) in the planning of social and health services, the aim being to create a network comprising public and private actors at different territorial levels [Paci 2008]. In 2001, the Tuscany Region created a permanent citizens' forum consisting of the regional councillorship and various associations. Regional law 40/2005 provided for local integrated plans (social and health services on a sub-regional scale) together with the *Società della Salute*, created in 2004. The activation of participative processes on the regional health plan is a prerogative of the regional government, as are all strategic planning documents (Regional Law 69/2007).

the Health Commission in the Regional Council described the choice of topic for the ETM2 as indicative of the scant interest in citizens' participation, and unwillingness to discuss these strategic issues precisely when the new regional health plan was being debated (our interview).

The topic selected did not match the demand for participation previously expressed by mobilized citizens and grassroots groups. The decision to reorganize the hospital network (*Progetto Area Vasta*[23]) provoked fierce conflicts in three out of the four towns – Lucca, Massa and Pistoia, which have different political traditions – where the building of new hospitals was planned. Amid worries about the reduction of certain services and the environmental and urban impact of these new structures, a number of grassroots groups applied pressure both on municipalities and the regional government through appeals, petitions, a call (rejected) for a municipal referendum, and a joint hearing before the Health Commission in the Regional Council (the only access obtained to the regional institutions). Legal action was also taken (civil lawsuits against the regional government and the municipalities). Mobilization in the electoral arena succeeded in shifting votes either to the centre-right or the radical left parties, according to the different local context involved. However, the candidates elected did not give any further concrete support to the protests and proposals.

The second ETM thus appears to have eluded both the institutional agenda and the concertation arena, and the oppositional sphere. The issue-framing power exercised by the promoting institution was particularly incisive, and it was amplified by the choice of conducting the dialogue with ordinary and atomized citizens. The grassroots groups were involved neither in preparation of the Guide for the discussion nor in design of the expert discussion witnessed by the citizens involved in the ETM.[24]

Indeed, the method used to select[25] the participants entirely excluded any possibility that grassroots groups might be admitted to the new arena. "This is the prin-

[23] The regional project envisaged the concentration of hospital services into four main centres: three university towns in the centre-west of the region (Florence, Pisa, Siena) and Grosseto in the peripheral south. In the other provinces, the intention is to create health facilities for short and medium-term admissions (of so-called "acute patients"). A recent deliberative experiment on this kind of issue in the UK led to changes being made to the initial project [Parkinson 2004].

[24] The Guide was prepared by means of interviews and focus groups involving about 110 people: 10 representatives of the *Società della Salute*, 18 from associations (unions, consumers, patients). The great majority of the interviewees worked in the regional administration.

[25] The random sample was drawn from 15,000 names in the telephone directory for 2004-2005, all of them of residents in the 10 areas where the 10 ETM centres were located. A letter about the ETM2 announced that a telephone call might be made to check the person's availability to participate and to gather data on gender, age, exemption from health charges. Those who said that they were available received a further five telephone calls. Out of the three hundred people enrolled, and one hundred in reserve, only 197 actually participated in the ETM2: 89 in Carrara, the main centre, 108 in

ciple at the base of the law on participation […] which seeks to achieve the greatest inclusiveness possible: to obtain this, even those who do not have a direct interest in the question, and are normally excluded from participation, must be allowed to express their opinions. This proposal addresses those citizens who do not participate in discussion and are silent because they are not informed or not interested in being heard" [Fragai 2008, 8].

Contrary to the first ETM, the identification of issues, interlocutors and discussion agenda did not derive from a *political mediation* that reached a compromise between institutional and oppositional agendas. This second ETM instead evinced the simple cancellation, *without negotiation*, of the main issue in the relative policy area, which was evaded by means of a deliberative process focused on an issue not regarded as problematic by any group nor even in the institutional concertation arena. The new deliberative event was held within an "information bubble" with an entirely inadequate information campaign, thereby neglecting one of the distinctive and legitimating features of the deliberative poll on which the ETM2 was apparently modelled [Andersen and Hansen 2007, 547-550; Cuesta *et al.* 2008].

To sum up, in this case, too, the policy at stake seems to have been decisive in shaping the arena, particularly through the enrolment procedure adopted. In particular, one can consider that the restriction of access, the atomization of participation, and the irrelevance of the main issue discussed at the second ETM seem to have been in inverse relation to the nature and importance of the real interests at stake.[26]

The Actual Participants

The shaping of the arena – that is, selection of the topic and definition of specific contents, access rules and the device – and the information campaign are two important stages in the organization of deliberative events. Their intrinsic features have foreseeable implications for the selection (and self-selection) of the participants. Who actually deliberates is still today the weakest element in institutional deliberative processes, in sharp contrast with their strong symbolic and theoretical significance.

Although the recruiting methods were different, the difficulties of obtaining the foreseen number of participants were high for both ETMs. In the case of ETM1, the difficulties were overcome by recruiting students. In the case of ETM2, the citizens

the other 9 centres. Only 6 people participated in Arezzo and Siena, and 21 in Florence, the regional capital, where 30 persons were expected to attend the discussion.

[26] The regional law on participation provides for funding of about € 5,000,000 over five years.

recruited by the random sampling procedure, and who agreed to participate, were asked to bring a friend or members of their families. At the outlying venues, there were also public officials or local administrators, perhaps as substitutes enrolled at the last moment, among the participants.[27]

The combination of issue framing and the participant selection method produced a series of incentives and disincentives to participation which gave rise in both cases to marked self-selection. The participants in both ETMs were very different from the regional population, and especially from the "ordinary citizens" to whom the institutional rhetoric on both deliberative events insistently referred. Apart from the selection method adopted, the more burdensome a participative task is in terms of personal involvement, the more the self-selection process will be to the disadvantage of socially marginal and less motivated subjects: women, young people, immigrants, the unemployed, the lower educated, and housewives. Whilst this strong self-selection applied to both audiences, the latter differed in certain important respects (according to the reports on the two initiatives[28]): 49.9% of participants were women in 2006 and 42.9% in 2007; 52,8% were graduates in 2006 and 22.9% in 2007; young people (18-24 years old) accounted for 10.9% of participants in the first ETM but only for 1.6% in the second; housewives – not present in 2006 – were 8.6% of participants in 2007.

The information gathered by means of the questionnaire revealed further important socio-demographic differences: the audience for ETM1 was largely made up of workers and students; that for ETM2 consisted generally of retired persons and workers. Only 12.5% of participants were aged over 65 in 2006, and 43.9% in 2007. Both audiences, however, comprised citizens with clear political attitudes and political behaviours, and a more accentuated social centrality than the average of the Tuscan population.[29] The political profile of the ETM1 participants was even more marked[30] than those of the ETM2 participants. Both samples were politically more active than the Tuscan population as a whole (see Table 1). The ETM1 participants were not only very interested in politics, but they also showed extraordinarily high rates of political-administrative experience for "ordinary citizens:" in 2006

[27] Participants in the second ETM were offered a small economic incentive: € 50 in mobile telephone services for each participant.

[28] The reports are available on the Tuscany Region website: www.regione.toscana.it/partecipazione.

[29] Two examples: graduates represent only 6.7% of residents in Tuscany, housewives 14.1% (Census data, ISTAT 2001). Data on graduates attending the second ETM were drawn from our questionnaire; they were not given in the official report.

[30] To confirm their lower interest in politics, participants in the second ETM positioned themselves on the right/left dimension much less than did the ETM1 participants.

about 25% of participants had held public offices (as town councillors, councillors, mayors, etc.), and about 10% had held two public offices. In 2007 these percentages dropped respectively to 8.2% and 2.7%.

TAB. 1. *Comparison. Degree of interest in politics: comparison between ETMs, Itanes Italia, Itanes Toscana samples (percentage values)*[a]

	ETM1 Sample (N=197)	ETM2 Sample (N=152)	Itanes Toscana (2006) Sample (N=116)	Itanes Italia (2006) Sample (N=2.002)
Not at all interested	0.5	6.6	22.7	30.0
A little	9.6	32.9	54.2	42.0
Fairly	45.7	43.4	20.6	23.5
Very much	44.2	17.1	2.5	4.6
Total	*100*	*100*	*100*	*100*

[a] The Itanes Italia sample is that used by the post-electoral Itanes study of 2006 (N=2011). The Itanes Toscana sample is the regional subset of the national one. [Mete 2008].

In regard to position on the left/right political axis, in 2006 the distribution was strikingly left-biased. Positions 1 and 2 on a scale of values from 1 to 10 were occupied by half the respondents. In 2007 this clear characterization of the participants diminished: those placed in the three positions most on the left (1, 2 and 3) substantially decreased in number, while those who chose moderate centre-left positions (positions 4 and 5) increased. Regardless of how the participants were selected, centre-right voters seem to have 'snubbed' both ETMs. This strong imbalance to the left was matched by opinions on general issues: for instance, with regard to public goods and the state's role in the economy, the participants in both ETMs staunchly defended the public sector.[31] Although Tuscany is not a region where these are mainstream positions, percentages of centre-right and right voters among all participants in the ETMs were very small.[32]

Both ETMs attracted few participants of a political orientation opposite to that of the institutional promoters. In 2006 this could be explained by the topic selected,

[31] With marginal differences between participants in the first and second ETM, more than 80% were 'quite' or 'very' opposed to the privatization of public goods. What worried respondents most about the privatization process was its threat to the principles of solidarity and universality in the delivery of services.

[32] More specific evidence of the substantial absence of centre-right respondents is the small percentage of them who stated that they were close to the two main rightist parties. Only 1.6 % in ETM1 stated that they were close *Alleanza Nazionale*. 2.1% in 2007; 1.1% to *Forza Italia* in ETM1. and 2.7% in ETM2. In the 2006 general elections for the Chamber of Deputies, *Alleanza Nazionale* obtained 12.6% of votes, and *Forza Italia* 16.9%, in Tuscany

because 'participation' is a traditional leftist watchword. In 2007 the under-representation of the centre-right must be explained in different terms: for example, the lesser expectation of influencing public decision-making, given that the institutional publicity for the event stressed that the ETM2 results would be "useful but not binding" [Fortini 2007].

TAB. 2. *Comparison. Self-location on a left/right scale (percentage values)*

	ETM1 (n=180)	ETM2 (n=138)	Difference ETM1 – ETM2
1	19.4	9.4	-10
2	31.1	15.2	-15.9
3	18.3	13.8	-4.5
4	5.6	13.0	7.4
5	4.4	8.7	4.3
6	3.9	2.9	-1
7	3.3	2.9	-0.4
8	1.1	1.4	0.3
9	–	0.7	0.7
10	–	0.7	0.7
I do not want to place myself	3.3	17.4	14.1
This distinction does not apply to me	9.4	13.8	4.4
Total	*100*	*100*	

It has been stressed that *minipopuli* are not representative in an electoral sense [Goodin and Dryzek 2006, 220]. Nevertheless, both of the cases studied exhibit such an intense homogeneity of political orientations to be largely incompatible with the inclusive nature of the two sets of citizens emphasized by the institutional promoter.

Although both were very close in their political beliefs to the regional government, their attitudes towards politics differed greatly. The ETM1 participants were distinguished by commitment, enthusiasm, interest, and even passion for politics. The ETM2 participants were instead more apathetic about, or even disgusted by, politics. At a time of general political disaffection [Hay 2007; Mete 2010; Norris 1999; Pharr and Putnam 2000; Torcal and Montero 2006], even highly politicized citizens living in a region, like Tuscany, with a solid tradition of political participation, now show relatively high levels of hostility against politics. Whatever the case may be, and even with pronounced differences between the two samples, the participants in ETMs differed from the Italian citizens who state that "rage" and "suspicion" are the first two feelings provoked in them by politics [Biorcio 2007, 198].

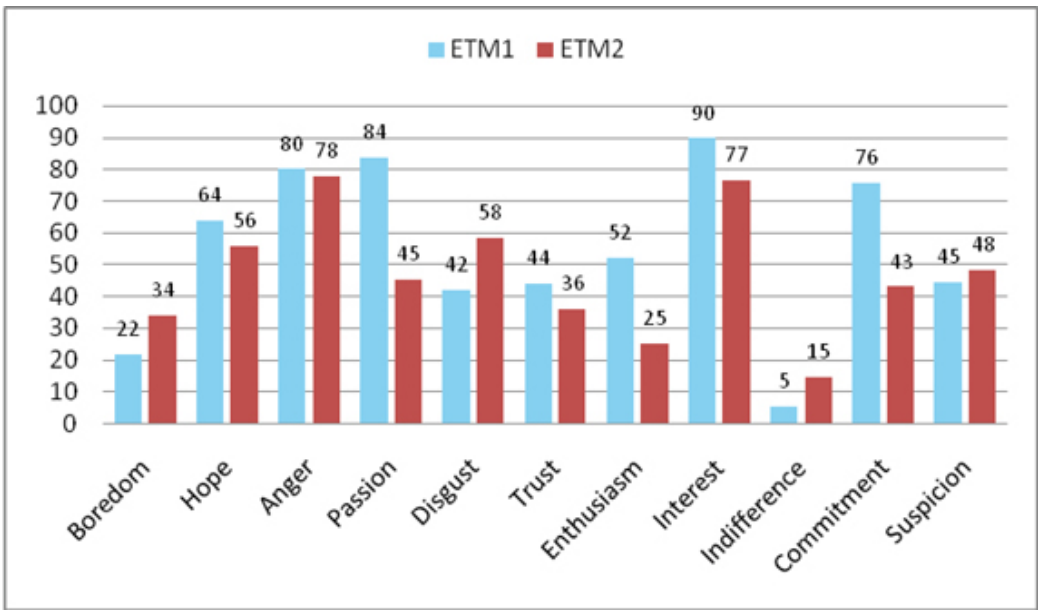

FIG. 1. Comparison. Feelings evoked by politics (sum of % of 'quite strong' and 'very strong')

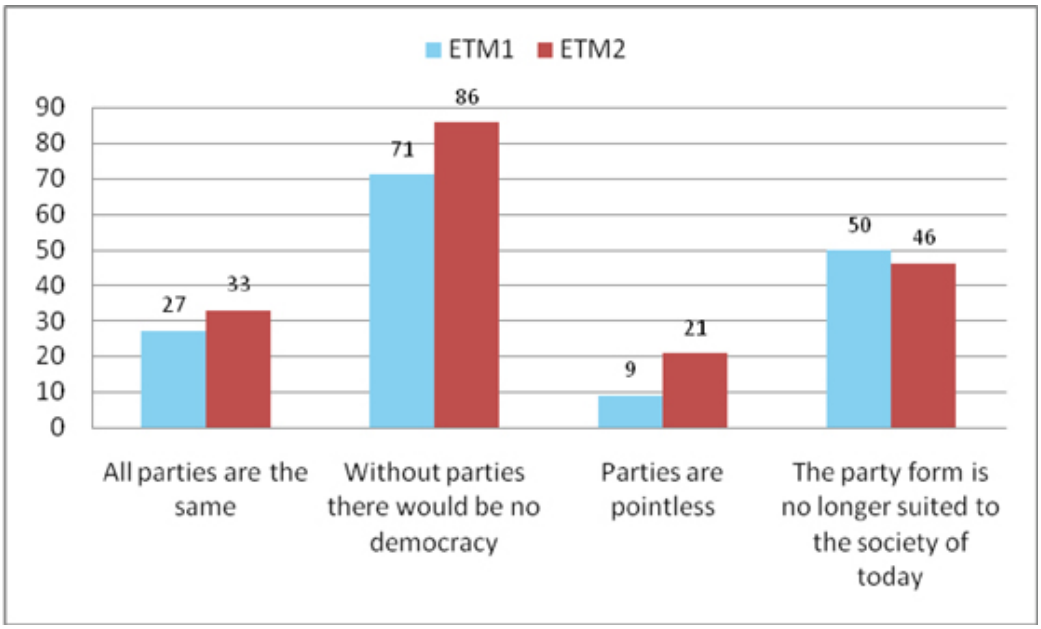

FIG. 2. Comparison. Opinions on the role of political parties (sum of % of 'quite' and 'very')

Anti-political feelings, specifically anti-party ones, were also evinced by the opinions expressed on the role of parties in contemporary society. Participants in the ETMs clearly expressed, albeit with different nuances, their dissatisfaction with the current workings of politics and parties. The majority agreed

that there could be no real democracy without political parties. As has already been pointed out, the combination of the inefficiency of political parties and their indispensability for democracy makes them "necessary evils" [Dalton and Weldon 2005]. This opinion seemed also shared by the ETM participants: half of them believed that the party system was unsuited to present circumstances.

Opinions on parties, their suitability, and their importance in safeguarding democracy linked with participation in institutional and political life. Participants in the first ETM, also because of the many local public offices held, were closely involved in political parties and associations. Altogether, more than six participants out of ten had in the past two years been members or taken part in the activities of political parties or organizations. Participants in the two ETMs, albeit with some differences of frequency, also exhibited a high level of involvement in associations, particularly cultural and educational ones. Differences between the participants in the first and the second ETM are much less clear in regard to other kinds of participation (in unions, professional associations, charities, voluntary welfare organizations, religious associations), even though the ETM1 sample was slightly more involved than that of 2007 (see Figure 3).

Contrary to the stated aims of the promoters, the two events attracted citizens that were already mobilized and engaged in other participative activities (parties, political associations, unions, cultural and educational associations), even attending party and union congresses, or annual conventions on explicit political and social issues, such as the San Rossore meeting on globalization, or the *Terrafutura* meeting in Florence on sustainable development and consumerism, or the Antiracist Festival of Cecina.

TAB. 3. *Comparison. Participation in the listed activities in the past five years (percentage values)*

	ETM1	ETM2	Difference ETM1 – ETM2
Cecina anti-racism meeting	22.0	3.4	-18.6
San Rossore meeting	31.9	5.4	-26.5
Terrafutura (Florence)	49.3	5.5	-43.8
Party congresses	35.9	11.6	-24.3
Trade union congresses	21.9	12.2	-9.7

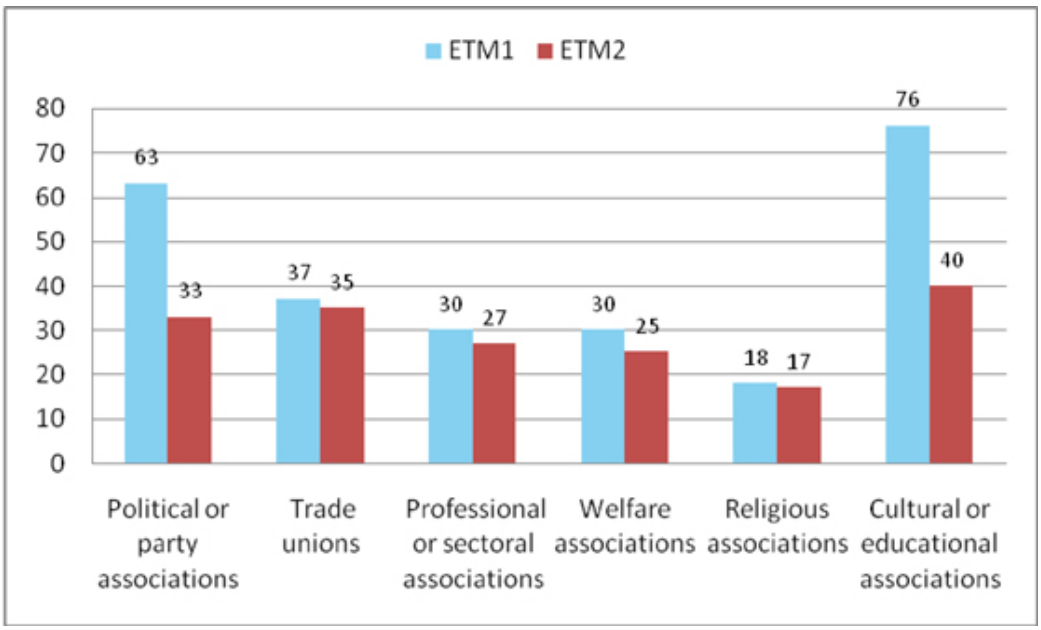

FIG. 3. Comparison. Activity in /membership of different types of participative organizations in the past two years (sum of 'participation with membership'; 'participation without membership'; 'membership without participation') (percentage values)

Further confirmation of the participants' great interest in politics and their social commitment is provided by the high levels of participation in the activities in social movements and other forms of collective action. The most common forms of mobilization were, for both samples, those related to the issues of peace and the defence of human rights. In view of the greater activism of the ETM1 participants, and given that the differences between the two samples concerned political issues (migrants' rights, defence of public goods, infrastructures), it is possible that the general profiles of the two actual samples were due, besides the selection methods adopted, to the issues discussed.

An important difference between the two ETM audiences can be inferred from the general trend in their participation over the past five years. Participants in ETM1 were strongly committed to the public sphere, and in the preceding five-year period had diversified the issues and groups in which they had taken part. For these people, participating in an event like an ETM on the issue of participation was only a further event in the everyday activities of politically committed and competent persons.

By contrast, the ETM2 audience seemed to consist of citizens "in retreat" from public commitment, although they were certainly not apathetic. In the past five years their participation had diminished overall in terms of involvement in groups and issues addressed. Because of the high average age of the participants in the ETM on public health spending – which was a further self-selection factor in terms of free

time availability – it appears that this event was attended by persons who had taken active part in political and social life in the past and who now, for various reasons, mobilized on much more specific issues closer to everyday life.

TAB. 4. *Comparison. Participation in movements and other forms of collective action in the past five years (percentage values)*

	ETM1	ETM2	Difference ETM1 – ETM2
Pacifist or anti-war movements	59.2	37.1	-22.1
Human and civil rights movements	50.8	29.4	-21.4
Movements in defence of legality and against organized crime	43.0	20.0	-23.0
Movements to defend immigrant rights	37.6	14.9	-22.7
Campaigns in defence of public goods or against privatization	37.2	14.6	-22.6
Women's movements	33.0	20.7	-12.3
Movements against large-scale public works	24.7	9.2	-15.5
Movements for the defence of digital rights and information rights	19.9	7.0	-12.9
Gay rights movements	19.8	8.5	-11.3
Animal rights movements	17.6	15.4	-2.2
Movements for the right to housing	12.6	10.6	-2.0

To sum up, the data on actual participants show that low inclusiveness is one of the most common difficulties in the organization of ad hoc deliberative arenas, as confirmed by the specialized agencies that manage such devices [Ryfe 2002]. Besides scant socio-demographic representativeness, the political profiles of participants were very compact and matched the political orientation of the institutional promoters. Participants in the two ETMs differed only in the intensity of their political engagement: which in the first case was typical of stakeholders and partisans, and in the second, of citizens "in withdrawal," with an average interest in politics but certainly not devoid of political commitment.

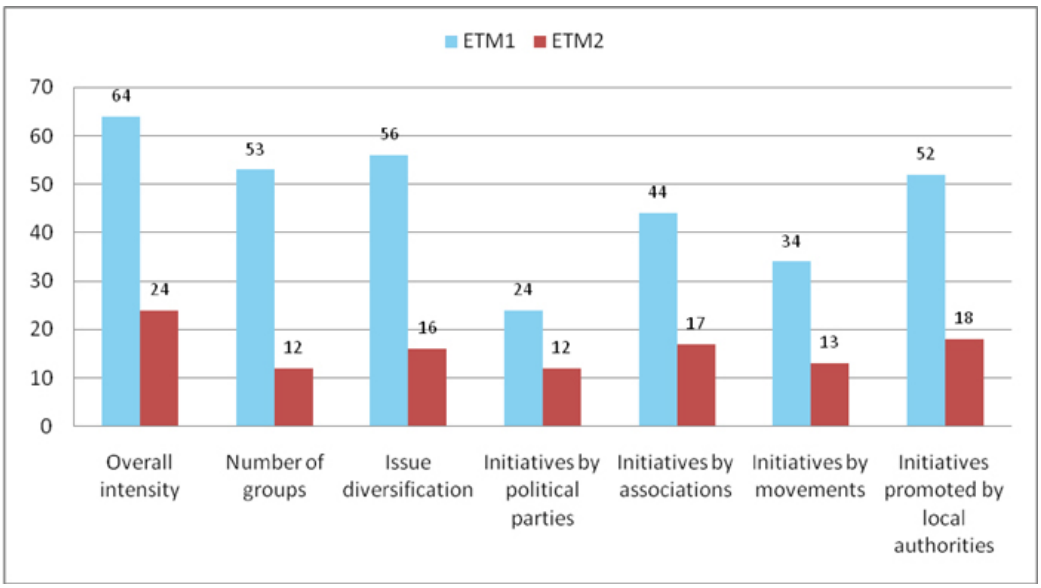

FIG. 4. Comparison. Increase in participation in the past five years (percentage values)

The Deliberative Device in Action

ETM1. The Re-emergence of Negotiation

The two ETMs took place as part of a large annual exhibition on services and innovations addressed to local administrators. ETM1 was altogether an impressive and spectacular event. Large monitors towered above a colourful stage erected in an marquee accommodating around four hundred participants, and in which the organizers had distributed fifty-odd tables. Each table had a facilitator helped by an assistant: the participants' comments were sent to the "theme team" consisting of researchers and regional officials. Participants engaged in six hours of rather intense activity: a televote to collect socio-demographic data and participant motivations preceded three fifty-minute sessions of discussion, each devoted to the issues stated in the Guide ("How can public participation in a particular project be improved?" "How should large-scale public works be decided?" How can the difficulty of informing the public be resolved?).

The participants reacted with disappointment to the results of the first televote: apart from gender, the socio-demographic representativeness of ETM proved to be rather limited. Also the organization of the session was criticised: the participants had little time to speak; and the scheduling of the discussion did not leave enough time for more controversial matters (such as decisions on large-scale public works).

There were evident asymmetries in the round-table discussions between a minority of 'ordinary' citizens and a majority of experts, many of whom had been in-

volved in compiling the Guide writing up. As the hours passed, the debate was increasingly taken over by the more expert participants, who were accustomed to speaking in public. The discussion consisted largely in the sequential exposition of the views of individual participants. There was too little time for debate, and contributions to it did not intertwine, so that the discussion resembled a 'patchwork'. The discourse was constantly interrupted, and speakers did not have time to sum up. The impression gained was that of a consultation, the gathering of feedback on the prompts contained in the Guide or ones proposed by recognizable opinion leaders. The fewer forceful opinions expressed at the tables of citizens recruited by random sampling combined with haphazard remarks, some of them "off-topic," so that the discussion was very distant from real dialogic exchange.

The task of the facilitators[33] was to let all the possible opinions emerge without seeking to steer them to a consensus. The comments made at each table were collected by the "theme team;" and then selected, aggregated, collated and returned to the audience, but without again being fully discussed. The table assistants, most of whom were self-candidates, performed a more important role than expected: the relevance of their function to entering the comments of the participants into the electronic module grew as this operation became the main concern at each table.

Televoting, one of the innovations most emphasised by institutional promoters, proved to be one of the most problematic part of the procedure. The participants expressed frustration that the televoted items complied with the Guide, without account being taken of comments arising from discussion at the tables. Moreover, the reply options to many questions were not mutually exclusive: the impossibility of graduating the vote or expressing several options was frustrating. It was not possible for participants to evaluate the influence of abstentions because absolute frequencies were not available, only percentages.

The perception of self-inefficacy activated a series of corrective and adaptive strategies: agreements on how to distribute votes across several alternatives, protest votes, the choice of the option obviously most distant, and group abstention. The orientation to argumentation diminished, giving way to strategic behaviour. The goal became that of obtaining the same inputs from the greatest number of tables, so that an issue different from those envisaged by the Guide could be imposed, thereby changing the agenda drawn up by the institutional promoters. A visible network of participants – experts, administrators, from their-own beliefs association representa-

[33] The facilitators at both ETMs, who were unpaid volunteers, were very diversified: professional mediators, researchers, students or experts in participative politics and, at the first event, also public officials, due to the greater number of facilitators required.

tives, researchers, 'practitioners' in the new professionalized sector of the management of participation – based on previous relationships (associations, movements and parties), moved among the tables to consult and foster demand that the participative process should not conclude with the one-day meeting. These "deliberative activists" [Fung 2005] altered the "ideal" deliberative situation by means of strategic action. At the end of the ETM, they achieved their goal when a question not in the Guide – on whether table representatives should be involved in the next phase of drafting the law – was submitted to televote. The ETM1 participants divided between those who wanted all participants to be involved in this further phase (46.5%) and those who would prefer a delegation (48%), as in a "reconnecting experiment" [Goodin and Dryzek 2006, 235].

Table representatives – most of them from the network active during the ETM – were convened two months later, after a letter signed by a number of intellectuals and opinion leaders in Tuscan civil society who had attended the ETM, and with the support of some regional councillors. Through the creation of a delegation, or a sort of "continuity group" (Focus Florence 2), the representatives of civil society managed to have the ETM's role scaled down in favour of a lengthier and more negotiated process also involving institutional actors. On the other hand, the regional government, thanks to the engagement of this network of deliberative activists, took the opportunity to strengthen the legitimacy of the process of drafting the bill before the Regional Council (Focus Florence 1).

The ETM2. Deliberating alone?

While the first ETM was followed by an intense 'post-event' information campaign promoted by the institutional actor, the fact that a second ETM was being organized went relatively unreported. As said, it proved difficult to recruit participants. Around half of them attended the meeting at the same venue as the year before, but this time in a smaller area and in more subdued surroundings. The others were distributed around nine outlying sites, some of them in small towns in the region, others in rather isolated villages, all linked with the "headquarters" by digital networks. The innovativeness of this technological platform was greatly emphasised, particularly with reference to coordinating the various sites with the headquarters, where a lead facilitator was present and a group of experts answered the questions arising from the round-table discussions. The emphasis on technology fuelled a feeling of being part of an innovative experience, but it also tends to passivized older participants.

The round-table discussions dealt with three main topics ("Healthcare charges: yes or no?;" Who should pay healthcare charges?" "Local health services"). In this case, too, the participants were asked to read the Guide, discuss it, send their comments to the theme team, and vote. Each table also had to agree on a question for each topic discussed; the lead facilitator would then put a selection of these questions to six experts invited to answer the participants from the main stage in Carrara.

At the beginning and midway through the ETM2 the participants were asked the blunt question: "Is it or is it not fair to pay health charges?." The stated aim was to determine how preferences changed in the course of the event. Although at the beginning of the discussion the majority of participant were in favour of health charges (66.9% vs. 22.1%; 10.8% 'no answer' and 'don't know'), in the afternoon the percentage decreased by 7% (60.2% vs. 33.7%) [Regione Toscana 2008, 30]. A third vote on the same question was announced but not held. The unexpected increase in participants opposed to health charges between the first and second vote would make institutional communication on the event more complicated/difficult.[34]

The pace of discussion and its focus on preparing questions for the experts made the production of comments by the participants less important. The participants were unable to discuss the arguments of the experts because the televote was held immediately after the latter had made their speeches: the result was somewhat unfocused discussion between regional officials and representatives of health-service workers and users.[35] It is understandable that, in these circumstances, the speeches by the experts were followed with constantly diminishing attention, especially by the participants at the local venues, where this phase closely resembled a telecast.

The third issue more closely concerned the reorganization of services. However, the set-up of the discussion precluded examination of crucial aspects, and the televoting was evidently disjoint from the discussion, in that it was designed to gather data on the level of information about, and use of health public services by participants. Also testifying to this greater concern to gather individual information is the fact that each televoting device was associated with the identity of individual participants.

Whereas the first ETM was dynamic and animated, the second was static and quiet. At the Carrara venue, the physical movements of both participants and observers were restricted because the facilitator asked them not to leave their places.

[34] The press release after the ETM2 stated: "Health charges: six Tuscans out of ten believe it is fair to pay them" [Zambelli 2007]. According to the final ETM2 report: "Some discussion tables, according to the facilitators, did not fully understand the question when it was asked the first time; they interpreted it as a question for or against taxes in general" [Regione Toscana 2008, 31].

[35] The experts were two regional managers (involved in three question-and-answer sessions), three trade unionists, and a representative of a medical association.

There were no visible networks of participants among tables. The only perceivable network was the one constantly pointed out by the lead facilitator among herself, the facilitators at the tables, and the local centres. Televoting was enacted individually: it did not generate conversation or concerted votes. The recurrent instruction by the lead facilitator – "Vote always and immediately! Always vote, even if you do not like the question!" – prompted by the need to operate the technological apparatus and gather data, imposed a disciplinarian atmosphere on the event. At the local centres especially, the act of televoting was performed by pointing the balloting device at the screen, as with a remote control at a television. Overall, discussion and voting took place in a very orderly manner, especially at the central venue, where participants appeared to comply docilely with the new ritual. Indeed, the performative effects of the deliberative setting seem to have been particularly strong and constrictive on ordinary citizens [Hajer 2005, 626].

The disciplinary effect, however, was absent from those local centres where the atmosphere was more informal and intimate, and the participants more emotionally involved, coming and going without explanation, so that voting was done by those who remained. At half of the tables more closely observed,[36] there were evident situations of asymmetry in communicative interaction, because of the presence of participants highly knowledgeable about these issues, public health service practitioners, or public officials, owing to the self-selection effect and last-minute substitutions. At some centres and tables, the small number of participants (e.g. six participants, including the assistant) discouraged discussion or blurred its focus. Moreover, facilitators at some local centres were not always neutral: for instance, in one case the participants were discouraged from asking "overly provocative questions" [Observation notes, Maresca-Pistoia centre].

Some local tables and centres were distinguished by energetic discussion and a critical attitude towards both the issues discussed and the deliberative setting. The selection method was criticized because its result was not representative or inclusive of the social actors most affected by the issues at stake. The agenda was considered evasive. The rule that each table must ask 'one question per theme' was judged unfair because it impeded pluralism. Some participants disputed the value of discussion

[36] Because of a previous agreement with the ETM managers, at the main venue the researchers were unable to mingle with participants, nor could they approach them except at the margins of the table area. Hence, for this site, only limited in-depth information was gathered about the progress of discussion at each table. By contrast, at the local centres, space was restricted, and there were fewer participants (from 6 to 21) and tables (from 1 to 3 per site), so that close observation could be made of each table. In sum, direct in-depth observation was conducted on half of the participants, albeit in different contexts: the main venue, constantly in the spotlight, and the much more informal local centres.

where it was impossible to change or alter the questions to be put to the televote. In sum, when facilitators carried out their task neutrally and the setting was more informal (less conditioned by the inhibiting and glamorous frame of the central venue), the participants were less conditioned by the Guide, and sometimes disregarded the agenda set by the institutional promoters and proposed new themes.

Indeed, the main criticism against the Guide concerned the discussion agenda set.[37] The problem of cuts in health spending was framed almost entirely in terms of "non-virtuous citizen behaviour" – citizens who resorted to accident and emergency wards in order to avoid waiting lists for specialist examinations covered by public welfare provision, or those who abused drug prescriptions. But there was no discussion of waste not connected with demand for services – excessive administrative costs, or even the relationship between the public and private sectors – all of which are crucial controversial issues in the oppositional public sphere. The discussion was therefore biased in its structure.[38]

Also the ETM2 ended with the designation of table representatives, although it was pre-arranged by the promoters and somewhat chaotic. However, one year later, the institutional promoters have not yet convened this informal body. Unlike the first ETM, the table representatives have not kept in contact, and they have not undertaken any form of coordinated collective initiative to induce the regional government to convene them.[39]

To sum up, ETM2 assumed more marked features of a one-day consultation, in a situation of greater participant passiveness. During the first ETM the sequential production of comments had been strategically manipulated by the participants through their pre-existing network; during the second event no new common stance was taken up by the participants. The institutional promoters' attention was focused on coordination among centres and the functioning of the entire process, with a

[37] As an activist of the grassroots groups, not involved in the ETM2, said: "Effectively, discussion cutbacks in public health services in favour of the private sector was not on the agenda. So attention shifted to health charges, which is not really an immediate problem. The regional health plan is immense and incomprehensible, but it is never discussed. Many analyses and criticisms have been made of this system; health charges are not the real problem. This is not participation: participation is when citizens mobilize on the reduction of hospital beds and are worried about the privatization of public health services."

[38] For example, using higher charges to discourage or punish citizens who make improper use of A&E wards ignores the fact that these "non-virtuous citizens" are usually those unable to afford specialist examinations or do not want to exploit personal relationships to gain privileged access to public services. Non-virtuous citizens usually end up being socially isolated, or they are simply non-opportunists.

[39] Telephone interviews conducted eight months later with the participants at six out of nine outlying centres revealed a generally positive evaluation of the event, accompanied by criticism of the total lack of opportunities for information and dialogue after the ETM.

strong emphasis on technology. Rather than the issue in discussion – with scant importance in decisional and substantive terms – apparently much more important was fine-tuning the technology[40] and promoting a hi-tech image of this new form of participation.

Direct and indirect results. Participation re-framing and outsourcing

Although both experiences were publicized as good practices in participative-deliberative democracy and obtained large institutional resonance, their empirical analysis reveals some significant shortcomings. At work in both initiatives were the mechanisms that may profoundly change the ideal aims of deliberation [Fung and Wright 2001, 34]: exclusion of less empowered participants, and consequently of their claims, and disempowerment of the more conflictual groups.

A first point to be borne in mind is the implementation of the two events as deliberative devices: both were lacking in terms of inclusiveness and with respect to the ideal deliberative process, although for different reasons. A second point concerns the results obtained in decisional terms: more substantial in the first case, wholly insignificant in the second. However, the adjustments of the public decisions do not seem to have been due to the contents produced by participation in the two events. A third point centres on the indirect effects, the political meaning of the promotion of these initiatives by the institutional actors, both within the specific context and as a wider trend. The background features described, and analysis of the two processes, may aid understanding of the political functions of practices inspired by the deliberativist 'vision' adopted by the institutional promoters.

If we consider the organization of the events, also their being designed and managed by experts extraneous to the context – intended to increase neutrality in the management of the ETMs – seems instead to have extended the margins of action available to the commissioning institutions. The information campaigns prior to the two events were minimal, so that an essential link between the assembled microcosm and a larger audience was lacking [Cuesta *et al.* 2008; Fishkin 1995]. There was scant publicity about the work done at the two events: nor have the comments or questions of participants ever been published in their entirety. Argumentative processes seem

[40] As also emerges from the interview with the ICT manager of the Region, the Tuscany Government plans to use a pre-existing territorial public network of Internet access-points as an infrastructure for participation, and, more likely citizens' consultation. A third ETM, held in November 2008, was developed as a highly 'technologized' event; it consisted of three main venues situated in three European cities and two virtual forums of 4-5 young citizens connected from their homes. For further information about the third ETM see http://www.ideal-eu.net/frontend/index.php.

to have been discouraged in the course of both events: there prevailed among participants a sequential discourse pattern made up of largely unconnected remarks. This effect seems to have been mainly a consequence of the setting, which allocated extremely limited time and appeared strongly focused on the gathering of ideas and information from citizens; its spectacular frame seemed addressed both to participants and to subsequent public communication on the events.

In sharp contrast with the rhetoric adopted by the promoters – who, also within the institutional arena, emphasised "the large representativeness of the regional population characterizing the five hundred participants" [Regione Toscana 2007b] – few ordinary citizens were involved in ETM1, and a sufficiently heterogeneous mix of political orientations was not obtained. Inclusive capacity was weak both externally (because of the self-exclusion of more conflictual grassroots groups) and internally (because of the wide asymmetries in discussions between the few ordinary participants and the majority of stakeholders-participants) [Fung 2005; Hendriks 2008, 1013; Young 2001, 53-55]. At the first ETM the creation of a delegation of participants excluded the few ordinary citizens involved, after the rules adopted on access to the new arena had already been strongly selective of the oppositional sphere. The characterization of the deliberation as being "among stakeholders" by the institutional promoters in the subsequent public debate [Floridia 2008] contrasts with the previous lack of acknowledgement of the more demanding stakeholders in Tuscany. The "deliberative activists" who decided to take part in the event, supported by some allied councillors and prestigious intellectuals, obtained a more important role in the following phase of debate on the draft of the bill. Their inclusion in this phase of the process enabled these participants to include in the draft the opportunity for bottom-up participative processes directly activated by citizens and to define the Participation Authority as a body of the regional council, contrary to the first draft, which stated that it should be under the control of the regional government. Thus, if a deliberative-argumentative process occurred, it happened *before and after* the ETM. It is likely that this kind of consultation – highly specialized and launched by the Regional Government – saw the alternation throughout the process, except for the ETM, of deliberation and negotiation. Deliberation and negotiation with stakeholders are in fact different modalities adopted and/or accepted by institutional actors in relation to their main salient needs, either informative or decisional, as and when they arise [Papadopoulos and Warin 2007b].

As a first regional experiment, ETM1 was an important investment in order to legitimate the adoption of these new deliberative methods – as it has proved for other initiatives [Dryzek and Tucker 2008, 872]. Legitimation was obtained in this particular case by means of a targeted informative campaign and negotiation on the

contents of the bill among government, deliberative activists, and political parties close to these activists. It therefore did not derive from the effective inclusive capacity of the event in itself, but rather from its public image/representation before the citizens, and, at elite level (both institutional and civil society), from a certain degree of effectiveness in negotiation. It was perhaps also for these reasons that there was no public discussion on the shortcomings of the experience, although the more recent studies on deliberation consider it necessary to sustain the credibility and the incremental improvement of the deliberative methods [Andersen and Hansen 2007; Papadopoulos and Warin 2007b; Thompson 2008].

The creation of a new deliberative arena and the rhetoric that accompanied it enabled the institutional promoters to strengthen the legitimation of the bill proposed by the regional government before the regional council. The ETM1 had, however, a general symbolic result of great importance of the centre-left regional government subject to growing challenges in both the representative and the legal arenas, and in the more radical left public oppositional sphere.

Indeed, the regional government set great political value on the process related to the first ETM. It recognized the network of subjects on the Tuscan left wing on the condition that they participated in formally non-organized manner: that is, as atomized citizens. According to this network actively involved in the ETM1, the risks of manipulation, because of the complexity and novelty of the topic, would have certainly been higher had the process been conducted on a random-sample deliberative model (Focus Florence 1). As the ETM2 evidenced, the exclusive involvement of isolated ordinary citizens, recruited by random sampling, would not have permitted expression of requests for the deliberative device to be adjusted. Furthermore, the regional government's non-recognition of the grassroots groups as political interlocutors exposed them, at the second ETM, to political manipulation by right-wing political parties and groups – particularly in those cities where the dominant left party was electorally weaker and the centre-right was comparatively better organized – thereby weakening the coordination of self-organized citizens.

However, whilst the first ETM maintained the features of a political process, albeit internal to the participative elites of variegated Tuscan left-wing culture; the second was highly de-politicized and assumed the features of an experiment in neo-managerial administration for the purpose of "testing the market" [Bohman 1996; Goodin and Dryzek 2006], moreover on a non-conflictual issue and with a total absence of decisional impact. The results, in terms of participant inclusiveness and diversification, were meagre, both in relation to the agenda and the oppositional sphere actors, as well as to the aims of socio-demographic representation emphasized by the selection method adopted. The ETM2 did not generate any virtuous circle between

micro and macro deliberation [Hendriks 2006a, 498]. The impact of the second ETM on decisional processes also seemed weak to the Public Health Councillor [Regione Toscana 2008, 39], who, in the final report on the event, referred to "requests" advanced by the ETM2 participants (revision of the health charge exemption system, which should be based on the user's actual income; stricter controls on the collection of health charges and the use of emergency services, such as accident and emergency wards and oncological examinations) which were proposals already on the regional government's agenda.

Although, or perhaps as confirmation of the features of its generating process, the regional law on participation has been evaluated positively by all its main protagonists, a judgement was suspended while awaiting its implementation. The entire process was part of redefinition of political representation structures which was particularly problematic for the Tuscan left. The minor political parties on the centre-left closer to the social movements and the grassroots groups assumed different positions in regard to the law on participation. The Green Party (*Verdi*), who belonged to the government coalition, stayed out of the discussion and voted for the law, but also tabled a highly critical motion. For the radical left party (*Rifondazione Comunista* – PRC), being able to condition the results was important to guarantee larger spaces for initiative by citizens and a real, substantial role for the Regional Council.[41] The leaders of this party considered the law to be "the result of a mediation that opens up two possibilities: consultation or participation. The law may fail in practice"[42] (interview with the PRC spokeswoman). The positive results of the first ETM had been due to previous work on the ground, and for this reason very difficult to manipulate. The "temporal extension of the discussion was a guarantee of its quality," which was also pointed out by one of the main intellectuals involved [Ginsborg 2006].

Isolation and the extemporaneousness of the second ETM were considered its main shortcomings by both *Verdi* and PRC. According to them, the features of the second ETM were precise indicators of the participation model in which the regional government was most interested: a kind of vertical and individualized public consultation. The ETM2 and the primary elections, held in Tuscany by the leader party, had this plebiscitary feature in common: "as if the individual could become the guarantee of a democratic process, when only the process can" (Interview with the PRC spokeswoman).

[41] After a somewhat heated discussion in the Regional Council, which slowed the passage, in September 2008 Rodolfo Lewanski, Professor of Political Science at the University of Bologna, was nominated *Autorità Garante per la partecipazione* (Guarantor Authority of Participation).

[42] "The law now permits both possibilities. For me, it was born as consultation […]: it is important that citizens call for another invite after the consultation" (Interview with the PRC spokeswoman).

The new regional policy also was more explicitly linked to the features of opinion polling, if not directly of consensus manipulation through agenda setting and control over access to the deliberative arena.[43] "What has happened is that we have new instruments with which to sound out and analyse consensus, doing in a new way what marketing agencies or public opinion polls already do. This is not a law on participation, but a form of political control over what is going on in the community, a law against participation. It is based on the logic of the opinion poll. It is a blatant operation to annul participation. Today [six months after its adoption] enthusiasm for the law is dead. This is a dangerous law. *Participation works if it is self-organized, not if it is organized*" (Interview with the *Verdi* spokesman).[44]

The hostility of minority opposition parties towards experiments of this kind promoted by the government and the incumbent party is not new in Europe [Papadopoulos and Warin 2007b, 597]. But the cautious or negative assessments within the government coalition should be considered in light of changes in the wider political context. In April 2008, the national centre-left government resigned, and the centre-right won the elections. Moreover, the radical left parties failed to gain re-election to Parliament. The electoral defeat of the latter was crushing in Tuscany as well. As a consequence, on the one hand, their power to negotiate with the newly-formed centre-left Democratic Party – just constituted in the region as at national level – was weakened; on the other, the movement activists, who also contested the party's vertical and oligarchic organization, were forced to seek a new autonomous role in the fragmented electoral arena. It is not clear whether the weaker organizational position of the radical left party will favour relationship or whether it will produce new kinds of tensions with grassroots groups. At the same time, with a view to the administrative elections of spring 2009, the centre-right coalition hoped to broaden its electorate by drawing consensus more from disappointed voters than from new enthusiasts.

In this context, according to the spokesman of the main centre-right party (*Forza Italia*) in the Regional Council – who had challenged the president of the regional executive in the last regional elections – the institutionalization of participative processes can perform symbolic functions crucial for the majority party when it is losing influence on local society. The majority party had sought to "create 'parademo-

[43] "The town meeting was not a serious information campaign (which would reach 10-15 % of citizens): this reached only a part of the political class. This stuff convinced the believers who already believed. The political society that participated was purged. If the grassroots groups had intervened, they would have been overwhelmed" (Interview with the *Verdi* spokesman).

[44] Confirmation of this criticism is provided by the third ETM (November 2008) devoted to climate change and addressed to a young audience: in this case, too, a "non issue" was on the agenda. "Who today would say they want climate change? By now everyone has declared themselves against it. The UN. G8. Even Bush!" (Interview with the *Verdi* spokesman).

cratic' institutions to satisfy the desire to participate of dissatisfied activists [...]. The regional law on participation has a time-duration [5 years] functional to this reorganization phase in the majority party" (Interview with the *Forza Italia* spokesman).[45] These new participative arenas accommodate the homeless participative-deliberative citizens, orphans of associations and parties in an increasingly fragmented social fabric difficult to repair.

The Councillor for Participation's judgment on the transitory nature of the law does not actually appear so distant from this last decidedly instrumental interpretation by the opposition: "We have a problem in our relationships with single citizens, businessmen, workers, craftsmen, students. Does this mean further fragmenting the intermediate bodies and considering them unnecessary or outdated? No, it means that, in this phase, I do not know in a few years' time, we need to go beyond our traditional forms of participation like concertation with stable and recognized associations. This form can keep the political establishment stable, but it is rarely able to ensure that things get done."

Conclusions

In new deliberative arenas, the institutional actor "does not just benevolently devolve, as PDPA (*Participatory-Deliberative Public Administration*) theory often assumes, but rather in many circumstances has very clear preferences about the kind of policies it wants participatory fora to adopt, generally as a result of international macroeconomic pressures" [Baccaro and Papadakis 2009, 3]. Furthermore, deliberation on specific issues is often conditioned by decisions already taken. The use of a deliberative technique may be functional to promoting (the image of) the openness of the political class and the efficiency of the administration by avoiding political debate on the assumptions and effectiveness of public policies. In their study on participative-deliberative practices in the UK – strongly promoted by Prime Minister Tony Blair in parallel with transformation of the Labour Party – Lowndes, Pratchett *et al.* [2001] conclude that the benefits of participative-deliberative schemes as perceived by administrators "are largely internal to the commissioning organization, reflecting the information needs of decision makers and services providers rather than those of the community" [ibid., 211]. These needs, according to the political/administrative

[45] "This law was adopted to tackle an evident political problem, especially in some Tuscan left cultural contexts. In five years's time it will be seen whether there will still be a need for this law, or whether politics will be once again effectively able to control dissent. Normalizing dissent, channelling it and ritualizing it in a parallel arena… then we will see. This, in my view, was what happened (Interview with the *Forza Italia* spokesman).

context, may also be restricted to mere image-building, with no necessary connection with improved efficiency. In other words, in the view of the political elites the main aim of promoting citizens' participation seems to be that of achieving the maximum benefits of information and/or persuasion [ibid., 212].[46]

In brief, at the core of the two initiatives analyzed were not the participation needs of citizens, but rather the mainly symbolic ones of the local governing class. New *ad hoc* institutional arenas – "contending" for legitimacy not only with representative arenas, but also with legal arenas and the oppositional public sphere – seem therefore to add to other 'soft-power' instruments used by local government, such as the promotion of cultural initiatives on some of the issues on the agendas of social movements in the 1990s and 2000s (especially globalization and the environment). These initiatives may "distract" public opinion and active citizenship from taking action on more controversial issues, and also enhance the administration's understanding of ongoing cultural change, directing its course and facilitating its political management.

In the Italian and Tuscan contexts studied, however, the deliberative arenas seemed to perform a more specific function with respect to reorganization of the main centre-left party, within the framework of a national political situation controlled by centre-right parties equipped with powerful media resources (television and press), and of a local context increasingly difficult for the right, but also for the left. As new "ordinary" and "legitimate" spaces for the relationship between citizens and government, these "deliberative" intermittent spaces exempt governments from continuously responding to citizens, and political parties from performing their old function of promoting participation and political inclusion. This function can be now managed at intervals through a controlled form of *participation outsourcing* which relies on new expertise, and in line with the cartelization of the parties, often drawing on public financial resources. This transformation of the parties' functional profile promotes individualized participation and depresses representation activities in favor of the reinforcement of activities related to the selection and reproduction of the political class [Bartolini and Mair 2002].

With the creation of microcosms or *minipublics*, political elites seem therefore able to address the question of channeling consensus and political demands [Tucker 2008], but they are unable to solve the social problem of participation and political inclusion at the centre of the institutional rhetoric surrounding the promotion of par-

[46] Also administrators point out a series of eloquent drawbacks: the unrealistic expectations of citizens; additional costs; mobilization of organized groups; weakening of the authority of bureaucrats and elected politicians; overload of consultations, overload of pressures on decision-making, particularism-parochialism [Lowndes, Pratchett and Stoker 2001, 213-214].

ticipative-deliberative processes. The overall effect of the two deliberative processes studied here was more a domestication of bottom-up political participation than the opening of new inclusive participative spaces. The experiments analyzed seem to have been two incremental phases in the increasingly sophisticated use of methods and techniques able to provide governments with symbolic and cognitive resources, with a progressive weakening of the political dimension. At the same time, and more importantly, the new arena of participation is kept separate from the arenas of selection of the political class and post-democratic governance.

Institutional deliberative arenas therefore risk becoming the new frontier of "techno-politics." The risk of the "balkanization" of public opinion [Fung and Wright 2001, 36], through the proliferation of microcosms or *minipopuli* devoid of contact with the public sphere, appears to be an alternative converging on the effects of the use of political marketing techniques: these latter grow increasingly selective, thus producing a further fragmentation of citizens' sovereignty [Rodotà 1997], and without producing the expected emancipatory retroaction on political and social inequalities. Rather, these "bubbles" of democracy are part of the securitarian landscape distinctive of Western post-democracies since September 11. Owing to this atmosphere, all forms of dissent tend to be marginalized and criminalized, while the conditions for communication in the public sphere constantly deteriorate. This regressive trend in communication can only heighten the opacity and self-referentiality of the selection of a political class which seeks to find new sources of legitimacy for its decisions in technics [Pellizzoni 2006], whether this refers to the allegedly superior rationality of the market, or to a use of technology compatible with pre-existing power relations. The widespread emphasis on the adoption of new digital tools in the institutional experimentation of new deliberative arenas, regardless of the participatory-deliberative results thus obtained, highlights how technology is used for self-legitimising purposes.

In this sense, the illusion (or alibi) of a technical (technological and technocratic) solution to democracy's problems reflects both the onset of "governmentality" deployment [Sintomer and Blondiaux 2002, 33] – i.e. the framing, in the strong sense, of participation through the total disciplining of the political within self-legitimised devices [Foucault 1991; Mouffe 1999] – and the more classic process of incessant bureaucratization, from which neither the network society nor new public management seems able to escape. The anti-political bias in deliberative practices [Mastropaolo 2001; Mouffe 1999; Tucker 2008; Walzer 1999] is particularly evident when they are based on the construction of artificial groups of ordinary and lay citizens, of atomized and a-politicized individuals. Methods and techniques of participation-deliberation are also emphasized with regard to arenas composed of stakeholders [Bohman and

Rehg 1997; Pellizzoni 2005]. This emphasis is nourished by the large body of empirical studies on the internal functioning of such devices, regardless of the researchers' intentions. Techniques and formal procedures of deliberation, sometimes strengthened by a fetishistic display of technology, become so important in the institutional rhetoric and practices as to become their real centre, the lever which legitimizes them as rational, neutral, and distanced from the political representation arena and from the awkward areas of the public sphere. For this reason, new deliberative arenas may furnish the political class with a source of symbolic legitimation which paradoxically replaces the political, drawing on a new sort of expert knowledge, prescriptively depoliticized, and thereby producing a form of power which is scarcely accountable.

Features of the two Electronic Town Meetings

	ETM1	**ETM2**
Issue and Goal	Negotiation on the issue at stake: definition of guidelines for a regional bill on participation "Constituent" process	Issue: deliberation (not binding on decision-makers) concerning citizens' contribution to health public spending Unilateral definition of the issue (non conflictual)
Construction of the arenas	Emphasis on "ordinary citizens" and on the new deliberative devices as alternatives to the grassroots groups Participation on a voluntary basis. Preparation of the agenda through semi-public meetings, experts, public and private practictioners Tension on the method adopted (Electronic Town Meeting)	Limited/narrow communication Random sampling of the participants. Preparation of the agenda through focus groups and interviews, mainly with actors from the local administration and its health structures Unilateral choice of the method (Deliberative Poll, labelled as ETM).
Profile of actual participants	400 effective vs. 500 foreseen, gathered in one centre Strong self-selection (politically active, involved in local government, leftist participants), "professionals" in participation	200 effective vs. 300 foreseen (half in the main centre, half in 9 local centres). Strong self-selection (centre-left wing, elderly, male)
The deliberative device in action	Informal situation Networks of participants Strategic behaviour (in expressing comments and voting)	'Cold' and static situation at the main centre, more informal at the local centres Atomized citizens Fragmented discussion

	Marginal role of random sampled citizens	Experts selected by promoters
Influence on decision-making process	Through the opening of a post-ETM phase, thanks to a political negotiation between a "participative elite" who had attended the ETM, and the representative arena	No influence. Confirmation of the administrative agenda
Salient profile	Negotiation process internal to the political elites closer to the regional government Outsourcing of participation from the grassroots structures of the dominant party, which is undergoing a problematic reorganization phase	"De-politicized" process Experimentation of framing non issue Neo-managerial consultation Increased emphasis on digital technology
Strategic effects	Framing and legitimation of a individualized model of participation, based on the exclusion of grassroots groups from the new arena Political marketing addressed to centre-left citizens Inclusion of radical leftist party, previously excluded, within the regional executive. Legitimating the new law and the new methods proposed by the regional executive before the legislative power Promoting the regional government's image in terms of openness and being in the forefront of participation and innovation	Confirmation of a preference for a model of participation addressed to lay-ordinary citizens Disempowerment of grassroots groups and their agenda Neo-managerial experiment addressed to "isolated" citizens Promoting the regional government's image in terms of openness and being in the forefront of participation and innovation

Besides Erika Cellini and Luca Raffini, for their contribution to the field research and useful discussion of the previous drafts of this article, we wish to thank the Ph.D. students at the Department of Political Science and Sociology, University of Florence, the small group of graduated and the final-year students of the Department, who assisted us with the crucial phases of the empirical work. The first and partial research results were presented at the conferences of the "Società Italiana di Scienza Politica" held in 2007 and 2008: we are grateful to the discussants and researchers who took part in the panels which discussed our research.
We are especially indebted to the participants at the two Electronic Town Meetings who compiled the questionnaire and to all the interviewees and participants in the focus groups for their collaboration. The authors alone are responsible for the contents of this study.
The research was conducted entirely with human and financial resources furnished by the Italian public university system. Specifically, it received a grant from the University of Bergamo and it benefited from constant synergies among the researchers involved.

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The Political Meanings of Institutional Deliberative Experiments

Findings on the Italian Case

Abstract: Based on evidence from empirical analysis of an emblematic case within the Italian context, this article proposes an interpretation of the political meanings implied in the institutionalization of deliberative practice. Through the adoption of a mix of quantitative and qualitative techniques, we conducted contextualized analysis of two experiments of public deliberation which have recently been promoted by the Regional Government of Tuscany. The research findings show that the general effect of the two processes was more the domestication of bottom-up participation, rather than the opening of new inclusive and participative spaces. Relevant political functions have emerged with reference to the internal needs of party elites and to the competition/negotiation between consolidated and new political actors.

Thus, we suggest that institutionalization of deliberative democracy can be better understood when put in relation to the current process of functional adaptation undertaken by some institutional political actors. Through 'outsourcing' and individualizing participative processes away from the party arena, ruling elite would maintain the control over their own selection and political agenda. In other words, in some contexts the institutionalization of public deliberation operates more like a complementary instrument than a real remedy challenging post-democratic governance.

Keywords: public deliberation, post-democracy, participation, local governance, Italy.

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