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## Framing a Deliberation. Deliberative Democracy and the Challenge of Framing Processes

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# Framing a Deliberation. Deliberative Democracy and the Challenge of Framing Processes

## **Abstract**

Among both scholars and practitioners, the critical importance of framing processes in the realm of deliberative democracy has been neither formally acknowledged nor adequately studied so far. The purpose of this theoretical article is to craft and define the analytical concepts and methodological tools necessary to shed light on this complex relationship. After introducing the notion of 'deliberative frame', which is examined across two distinct framing processes – 'primary' and 'derivative' (or secondary) – this article presents 'deliberative frame analysis' (DFA) as a qualitative method which can uncover the 'meta-frame' and the specific issue framings (or the deliberative 'frames') within a deliberation. This is achieved by examining selected elements both of the organizational context and information materials, and will be illustrated by the example of a famous deliberative poll carried out at European level. Finally, the introduction of authentically competing frames (i.e. 'counterframes' and not merely counterarguments) into the deliberative setting, along with the structural possibility for 'reframing' in the course of the deliberation, is indicated as a substantive precondition for neutralizing the overall framing effects and thus avoiding a heavily biased deliberation outcome. The article therefore offers a more comprehensive understanding of framing processes as a key challenge for deliberative politics, particularly as regards the legitimacy claims of its various experiments and practices, which are increasingly common in most established democracies.

## **Keywords**

Deliberative Democracy, Public Opinion Processes, Deliberative Polling, Framing Theory, Qualitative Research Methodology

## *Introduction*

To date, the crucial importance of framing processes in the realm of deliberative democracy has been the object of repeated intuitions much more than that of rigorous study, both within the scientific and the practitioners' communities. Whereas there appears to be a generalized feeling that something important potentially occurs each time a deliberative arena is being 'framed' for the participants, a clear recognition of the nature of the concepts and relationships involved is still lacking. The purpose of this essentially theoretical article is to craft and define the analytical concepts and methodological tools necessary to shed some light on the seemingly obscure relationship between framing and deliberation practices, both for research and organizational purposes.

In relation to deliberative democracy, the obvious references are a number of informal deliberative practices, such as deliberative polls, as well as citizens juries and *débats publics*, which, especially since the early 1990s, have been increasingly implemented in a variety of multi-level policy arenas where they have often been promoted by local, national, and supranational political institutions (Gastil & Levine 2005; Besson & Marti 2006; Fishkin 2009). These practices, which usually hold a consultative rather than binding power, have been experimented with thus far in innumerable instances, mainly, although not exclusively, on a small scale, from the United States to European democracies – especially Scandinavian and northern European countries, Great Britain, Ireland, France, and Italy – and with a growing interest also at the European Union (EU) level (Curtin 2006).

In contrast, by framing processes (Bateson 1955; Goffman 1974; Entman 1993), as applied to deliberative practices, we mean the communication processes of structuring the context of meaning, or the interpretive framework, in which a deliberation is held. These processes concern the definition and the construction of the political or social issue under deliberation, and therefore, more generally, the modes of its formal presentation (Kahneman & Tversky 2000). The relevant point here is that 'deliberative elites' construct the frame of the discussion by selecting the legitimate viewpoints that are admitted into the procedure,<sup>1</sup> defining the alternatives at stake, emphasizing some elements at the expense of others, or suggesting interpretive connections among certain ideas and symbols. All this is likely to influence the process of opinion formation among participants, and, hence, the deliberation outcome.

Given these premises, the following theoretical questions will be addressed throughout this article: (a) What is the essential challenge that most deliberative practices are addressing to the 'real' democratic process? An understanding of deliberation as an extra-source of legitimacy for political decision-making within the framework of representative democracy is emphasized and discussed in its theoretical implications. (b) What is, more precisely, a 'deliberative frame' and how can it affect the deliberative procedure? In this section, the concept of deliberative frame is defined in its fundamental

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<sup>1</sup> By 'deliberative elites' we mean, in this article, those minority institutional and organizational actors who hold the 'communicative' power to structure the context of a given deliberation.

dimensions and across two distinct framing processes: ‘primary’ and ‘derivative’ (or secondary). (c) How can such a deliberative frame be detected in a deliberative arena? This part presents ‘deliberative frame analysis’ as a qualitative methodological device to uncover the ‘meta-frame’ and the specific issue framings (or the deliberative ‘frames’) within a deliberation, by examining selected elements both of the ‘structural’ context and the information materials. (d) What are possible moderators for framing effects in a deliberative context? The introduction of authentically competing frames (i.e., ‘counterframes’, and not mere counterarguments framed throughout the same interpretive principle) into the deliberative setting, and the structural possibility for ‘reframing’ in the course of the deliberation, are indicated as substantive preconditions for defusing the overall framing effects, and thus avoiding the consequence of a seriously biased deliberation outcome.

In sum, this article intends, first of all, to formally introduce into the scientific community the notion of ‘deliberative frame’ as a conceptual tool for examining the more problematical aspects of the relationships between framing processes and deliberative politics. Secondly, it aims to sketch the first outlines of a deliberative frame analysis, which addresses the methodological problem of how to identify the implicit, selective, and more or less partial frames in any deliberative context, using for this purpose the example of a famous deliberative poll carried out at European level in 2007. Ultimately, and in more general terms, this article intends to offer a more comprehensive understanding of framing processes as a key challenge for deliberative politics, particularly as regards the claim to legitimacy of its increasingly widespread practices within contemporary democracies.

### ***1. Procedural fairness and outcome legitimacy within deliberative democracy theory***

We shall posit, as a fundamental theoretical assumption, that informal deliberative processes such as citizen juries or deliberative polls aspire to complement, more than to replace, the formal means of representative democracy. If this assumption is true, the real asset of these modern deliberative practices seems to lie, at least from the perspective of institutional actors, in the added value in terms of the *legitimacy* that they vow to convey to the political decision-making process. Indeed, what democratic institutions at all levels – national, supranational, and subnational – appear to pursue through a growing implementation of deliberative practices is a ‘fresh’ attempt to legitimize collectively binding decisions, in the context of a decreasing perceived legitimacy of representative democracy (Entman 1989; Castells 2009). As a result, the involvement of citizens in participatory and deliberative experiences concerning potentially contested public policies comes to be seen as a powerful extra-source of legitimacy, particularly for those political decisions that have, in fact, already been pre-deliberated by institutional decision-makers but are expected to acquire an additional legitimizing power by a formalized popular endorsement. Within this widespread

search for new democratic legitimacy, the deliberative politics model, particularly in Habermas's (1996a, 1996b) influential formulation, bears a strong theoretical challenge, which has inspired numerous practical experiences set up by institutions both at sub-national (mainly municipal) and national or supranational (European Union) levels.

In theoretical terms, the intimate link between deliberative politics and the principle of legitimacy lies in the *procedural* properties of the deliberative process, both when the aim is generating a collective decision and when it is forming and aggregating a number of individual opinions. Whether the deliberation requires a nearly consensual decisional outcome (such as, for example, in consensus conferences or citizen juries) or the mere recognition of the participants' informed and considered opinions (as in deliberative polling), it is in fact the procedural correctness of the deliberation that, according to deliberative democracy theorists,<sup>2</sup> bestows legitimacy on the outcome of the decision and/or opinion.<sup>3</sup>

More precisely, the legitimacy of the outcome is generated by a procedure that is defined by formal criteria on the basis of which "proposals, information and reasons can be more or less rationally dealt with" (Habermas 1996a, 360). In this respect, Habermas's 'procedural' approach offers the fundamental theoretical basis to the body of deliberative democracy practices. The deepest significance of deliberative politics, in fact, consists in its being considered as an "ideal procedure of deliberation and *decision-making*" (ibid.) and, furthermore, as "the procedure from which correct decisional procedures draw their legitimacy" (ibid.). In the same vein, the degree of legitimacy of the influence exercised by public opinion on the political system depends, according to Habermas, on the procedural and generative properties of public opinion itself. This requires, among other things, that key information and arguments about a given policy issue are transformed, after passing through formalized procedures of controversy in the public sphere, into focalized opinions containing a certain degree of social approval. Once again, the legitimacy of binding decisions that are normally made by parliamentary and legislative bodies, administration agencies, or judicial courts (the 'authorized members' of the political and institutional system), possibly on the back of a more or less influential public opinion, depends on the formal quality of the processes of opinion and will formation.

Similarly, Bernard Manin (1987) demonstrates how the very principle of majority rule, despite being the supreme expression of the will 'of the largest number', cannot be an essentially self-legitimizing principle, but is bound to the participation of the citizens (or at least of those who wish to participate) in the

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<sup>2</sup> *Contra*: followers of John Dewey's perspective, who tend to see deliberation as a substantive 'device for detecting and solving social problems' more than as a procedural principle of political legitimacy (Eriksen 2007, 39). However, this position currently appears far less influential than that expressed by the Habermasian version of deliberative democracy.

<sup>3</sup> In other terms, this involves the relationship between 'input-legitimacy' and 'output-legitimacy' in a deliberative procedure (Papadopoulos & Warin 2007). Similarly, other authors (Grimes 2006, Carman 2010) have focused on the relationship between perception of procedural fairness and political trust and institutional legitimacy.

deliberative process: “the procedure preceding the decision is a condition for legitimacy” (ibid. 360), no less than the majority principle. It is, therefore, the combination of these two elements, namely, the majority principle and the deliberative-procedural principle, that is able to generate the legitimacy of a decision in a democracy.<sup>4</sup>

This brief theoretical analysis shows a major point of interest for the object of this article: when the highest procedural fairness is not guaranteed, a deliberation fails to provide the decisional outcome with the most distinctive added value that is present in deliberative democratic theory: outcome legitimacy. One might even conclude that a procedurally biased deliberation becomes a sort of contradiction in terms, a nonsense solution for contemporary democracies in search of a new legitimacy.

To be sure, at the roots of deliberative theory and practice lies a wide range of motivations and normative goals: from the expressive purpose of ‘giving citizens a voice’ to the inclusive aim of securing a greater participation in public decisions; from the realist proposition on the need to comply with the increasing plurality of governance and policy-making arenas, to the pragmatic argument over the necessity to resolve specific problems through relatively uncontentious solutions. Furthermore, the profoundly philosophical, normative, and abstract nature of Habermas’s ‘strong’ version of deliberative politics is, by now, well acknowledged by both ‘partisans’ and ‘opponents’ of deliberative democratic theories. Equally so are the hypothetical requirements of an ‘ideal speech situation’, a genuinely egalitarian public sphere that is free from all power asymmetries and rhetorical biases, and a deliberative procedure that is merely led by a ‘pure’ Habermasian logic of communicative rationality (and not, for example, by instrumental, manipulative, or simply identity-based appeals). In addition, fierce criticisms of the more idealistic aspects of the deliberative theory as expressed by Jürgen Habermas have been made on several sides (Fraser 1990; Benhabib 1996; Elster 1998; Crossley 2004) and have often been clearly taken on board by the actual promoters of deliberative practices. As a result, ‘salvatory’ claims and ambitions have been gradually replaced by a much higher awareness of the inherent limits of deliberative practices, which are increasingly being interpreted both as partial and imperfect forms of integration of the existing democratic-representative process. This has led, on the one hand, to privileging the promotion of deliberative experiments on a local scale or, in the case of broader scale experiments, to the avoidance of a ‘mass assembly’ approach, preferably dividing the participants into small discussion groups (Bobbio 2010). On the other hand, increasing attention has been dedicated to the problem of the deliberative ‘setting’ or, in other words, the body of norms and formalized

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<sup>4</sup> Jon Elster (1998, 1) notes that “the idea that democracy revolves around the transformation rather than simply the aggregation of preferences” has become one of the major positions in contemporary democratic theory, which is largely influenced by Habermas’s thought. However, he also points out how, in the opposition to Rousseau’s bounded mandates as expressed at the end of the 18th century by Edmund Burke or by the Abbé de Sieyès, there already existed all the awareness of the deliberative nature of democracy, which could not be reduced to the mere majority principle (ibid., 3).

procedures for carrying out a deliberative experiment. If in Elster's (1998) original definition the deliberative setting refers, above all, to the basic meta-communicative rules (for example, the banning of threatening appeals, or those based on mere self-interest or prejudice), in fact the definition of the deliberative context also calls into play more practical organizational aspects: from the location of the meeting to the method of selecting the participants, from the role of the moderator to the intervention of experts, to the times and the form of the discussion. Moreover, the preparation of the briefing material on the topic of the deliberation – an aspect that, although far from exhausting it, is the one most directly linked to the subject of this paper – is usually subjected to the greatest care on the part of the promoters.<sup>5</sup>

However, in spite of all these endeavours on the part of deliberative theorists, promoters, and practitioners to enhance as far as possible the practical conditions in which deliberations are held, there remains a fundamental yet seldom acknowledged challenge to the aspiration to a procedurally correct deliberation favouring the legitimacy of the deliberative outcome. This challenge is represented, as previously suggested, by the 'deliberative frame'.

## ***2. Conceptualizing 'deliberative frames' and the outlines of a 'deliberative frame analysis'***

As suggested in the introduction, there is a generalized feeling among scholars and practitioners in the field of deliberative democracy that the way in which an issue under deliberation is framed can affect more or less deeply the whole deliberative process. It is not clear, however, exactly what a frame is, how it can possibly be detected, or what implications it may have in the deliberation dynamics and outcomes.

To overcome these serious theoretical shortcomings, a possible definition of a deliberative frame and its conceptual dimensions must refer to the context of meanings, or the interpretive framework, within which a deliberation is constructed and presented to the participants by means of a *definition* of the issue (about what it concerns and does *not* concern, where the essence of the question lies, what is at stake, what the alternative options are), and such related processes as *categorization* (which cognitive and social schemata are called into play), *salience* (which aspects and sides of the question are emphasized and made more accessible), and *connectivity* (which interconnection with other familiar cultural symbols, metaphors, or meanings is suggested).

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<sup>5</sup> When organising citizens' juries (according to the methods of the Citizens Jury Project which is a brand registered by the Jefferson Center), for example, an Advisory Committee is created, made up of between 4-10 members representing various views and opinions. The committee's role is 'identifying key aspects surrounding the issue' and provide indications on 'the charge, agenda development and witness selection', in order to guarantee 'the integrity and fairness of the process as a whole' (The Jefferson Center 2004, 5). Nonetheless, the committee has purely consultation powers.

These processes of framing, which we shall designate as ‘primary’, as they relate to a frame’s straightforward capability to define a social situation, do not appear to be without important consequences on the alleged balance, and hence correctness, of the deliberative procedure. The literature on framing includes a series of processes that could be defined as ‘secondary’ or ‘derivative’, in that they result from a frame’s ‘primary’ defining faculty, and tend to organize the following ‘strip’ – to use Erving Goffman’s (1974) original language about ‘frame analysis’ – of social events. As applied to deliberative practices, in fact, the definition and construction of the deliberation’s context (i.e., the deliberative frame) generates not only an implicit *diagnosis* (‘this is the problem’), which could still be considered as part of the primary framing process, but also a *causal* interpretation (where the problem comes from), an attribution of *responsibility* (which collective or individual actor, if any, is responsible for the problem), a *moral* evaluation (such an actor is blameworthy), and, therefore, a *prognosis* or suggested remedy (how to resolve the problem).<sup>6</sup> Working at a meta-communicative and implicit level, the secondary framing processes are, therefore, those that affect the terms in which the participants think, interpret, and later evaluate the issue of the deliberation.

A deliberative frame, such as any other frame in social communication, suggests, in other words, that an issue or information should be understood, read, and judged in some terms rather than in others, according to a given perspective, in a determinate light. More importantly, even in the absence of explicit positive or negative judgments, and also in the presence of a plurality of specific viewpoints and counterarguments offered to the participants, one or more fundamental and implicit frames to the deliberation will generally tend to organize the discussion, and hence the collective decision-making or preference formation process.

In this respect, some possible examples of ‘deliberative frames’, although they are neither labelled nor conceptualized more deeply as such, can be found in the following pieces of research: Mirenowicz (2001), who shows how in a *conférence de citoyens* held in France on ‘GMOs in agriculture and food’ the issue was “framed in such a way that [...] the process tended to focus on the concept of national competition” (ibid., 3), while in nine other consensus conferences held in various countries around the world on the same theme “the citizens were not led to think in terms of choice between different options”, such as those of ‘sustainable agriculture’ or ‘local food security’, or to “tackle the GMO issue within an understanding of what vision of the common good could frame their reflection” (ibid., 4); Pellizzoni (2008, 17), who examines several cases of deliberative arenas in which “even those companies that are more sensitive to social and ecological issues have troubles in identifying and dealing with the public interests to the extent that profitability remains the meta-frame within which every other consideration is framed”; or Moore (2010, 727), who suggests that “by framing ethical questions such that some kinds of concerns

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<sup>6</sup> This inventory of implications includes some elements of the classic definitions of frames proposed by Entman (1993), Iyengar (1991), Gamson & Modigliani (1989), Snow & Benford (1988), Nelson et al. (1997).

appear legitimately ethical while others are merely political or transient matters of public concern, public bioethics may be reproducing problems of experts domination”.

It is worth emphasizing that, following this definition, the deliberative frame does not necessarily imply the simple positive or negative ‘valence’ of the topic proposed for discussion, or just the imbalance between the ‘for’ and ‘against’ arguments concerning a given policy solution. In effect, the deliberative frame is a construct existing at a more implicit level, and for this reason it may govern the procedure and even determine the outcome of a deliberation without there being: a) any appearance of formal flaws, b) any participant in the deliberation being aware of it, and c) any promoter intending to alter the point of equilibrium of the deliberation.

Clearly, should condition c) not be complied with, this would constitute a literal case of *manipulation*, where those with the power to structure the deliberation introduce a bias in favour of a pre-established outcome, and do this over and beyond the cognitive horizon and ‘evidential boundaries’ of the participants, who would be incapable of grasping the element of communicative distortion. Again in Goffman’s language, this would be a case of *fabrication*, because the transformation of the situational framework is carried out without the knowledge of the participants. Therefore, at the moment the participants are asking themselves the fundamental question of “what is it that’s going on here?” – or, adapting it to the deliberative context, “what are we concerned with here?” or, possibly, “what is really at stake here?” – they are unable to perceive the frame’s boundaries and, as a result, cannot consciously import the related interpretive and judgmental principles. This is because, according to the authentic ‘pioneer’ in framing studies, Gregory Bateson (1955, 187), the frame, just like a picture frame, tells the viewer that “he is not to use the same sort of thinking in interpreting the picture that he might use in interpreting the wallpaper outside the frame”. In this sense, the frame is a *meta-communicative* message, a sort of invisible caption to the communication to which it is connected, an implicit invitation to interpret a given message or a given policy issue in a particular way, in particular terms.<sup>7</sup>

Nonetheless, the presence of a real attempt at manipulation on the part of the deliberative elite is not necessarily more alarming than its absence (Regonini 2005), in the presence, however, of an invisible and overwhelming frame that is, at times, invisible because it is only too obvious and has become ‘naturalized’ in the subject under discussion. The interest for the deliberative frame, therefore, does not prevalently lie in the search for ‘improper-because-manipulative’ uses of the deliberative practice, but rather in the possibility of rendering more explicit and visible the concealed, removed, or, in all cases, not sufficiently thematized premises of a given communicative situation.

On a methodological level, we shall try to outline the first elements of a specific methodological device, that is, a ‘deliberative frame analysis’ (DFA), to

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<sup>7</sup> Bateson’s famous ‘zoological’ example is that of young monkeys who, while they enjoy themselves by simulating fighting amongst themselves, ‘meta-communicate’ – despite not being able to verbalise the message – that ‘this is play’, with all the consequences that the ‘play’ frame can imply with respect to a ‘fight’ frame.

analyse at least two different levels of deliberative framings. A prevailingly qualitative method is imagined for this purpose. The first step consists in identifying both the structural-organizational and the discursive elements that the researcher should focus on while analysing any given deliberative setting, to let the main underlying frames emerge more clearly.<sup>8</sup>

In our proposal, the main elements to take into account in conducting a DFA are categorized as follows:

(1) *The organizational setting:*

- a. the identity of the promoting organization and respective sponsors
- b. the location of the deliberative practice (i.e., institutional, academic, civil society or business organization, etc.)
- c. the selection of the witnesses, experts, stakeholders, and representatives

This factual recognition of the fundamental choices in terms of organizational setting should allow the researcher to grasp what might be defined more precisely as the deliberative ‘meta-frame’, or the general framework of meaning in which the deliberative experience is being embedded.<sup>9</sup>

(2) *The information materials:*

- a. the title, sub-title, first statements, and final questions in the introductory page
- b. the selection of the relevant facts
- c. the selection of the included policy proposals/approaches
- d. the selection of the arguments for and against each policy proposal/approach

At this second stage, the analysis focuses on the content-related issue framings that, akin to news frames in the analysis of news media coverage (Gamson & Modigliani 1987; Tankard 2001), constitute the substantive deliberative frames within a public deliberation. For each textual element included in the information material distributed to the participants, the search for the underlying deliberative frame(s) should be carried out by means of a qualitative analysis of the lexical, rhetorical, and semantic structures of discourse.<sup>10</sup> This requires specific attention not only to the words used and the

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<sup>8</sup> Unlike other methodological instruments such as the ‘discourse quality index’ (DQI) (Steenbergen et al. 2003, Bächtiger & Hangartner 2010), which is a quantitative measure of deliberative quality depending essentially on the conduct of the participants – a ‘horizontal’ (or citizen-dependent) condition – deliberative frame analysis can be defined as a method for the analysis of the epistemic premises – or the ‘vertical’ (elite-dependent) preconditions – of deliberative quality.

<sup>9</sup> The deliberative ‘meta-frame’ has important analogies with William Riker’s (1986) concept of *heresthetics*, which may be defined as a structure-level manipulation of political choice. In political decision-making settings, this involves such meta-rhetorical (or non persuasion-oriented) and situational elements as agenda control or the strategic use of voting procedures. In this respect, the deliberative meta-frame can be interpreted as the result of the ‘herestetical’ effort, on the part of the deliberative elites, to control the structural setting in which a given deliberation takes place.

<sup>10</sup> In this respect, and given the inherently qualitative nature of DFA carried out on such brief information materials, this method can partly overlap with a discourse analysis approach (Pan & Kosicki 1993, Van Dijk 2001). However, DFA is less critically oriented and more specifically

definitions provided in the text, but also to all metaphors, slogans, catch-phrases, or emotionally charged expressions that contribute to construct meanings and define the interpretative context for the issue in question. In the analysis of these elements, the necessary use of different types of frames already present in the literature (or *generic* frames) can be combined with a more inductive approach, which captures and labels *ex-novo* the distinctive issue framings for a specific deliberative context (or *unique* frames: Borah 2011). Moreover, a further set of elements to be analysed might concern the ‘formal aspect of deliberative justifications’ (Steiner 2012), that is the prevailing mode(s) of communication and justification during the deliberative procedure, appealing for example to rational argumentation, or based, in contrast, on storytelling or humour or the narration of personal experiences, any of these modes potentially constituting a different situational meta-frame for the discussion. However, this aspect has been consciously bracketed in the present methodological proposal, since it would require participant observation all through the deliberative procedure, thus excluding the possibility of an *ex-post* deliberative frame analysis.

Overall, the interest of this technique of analysis consists, on the one hand, in highlighting the intrinsic partiality of selective deliberative frames even, as already mentioned, in contexts where there is a formally, or apparently, balanced and correct presentation; on the other hand, it consists in uncovering, or creating the conditions for uncovering, the “multiple and conflicting frames involved in a policy dispute” (Fischer 2003, 146), some of which can get more or less unintentionally marginalized through the official framing proposed by the deliberative elites and experts (Moore 2010).

### ***3. DFA in practice: analysing a classical deliberative poll***

We now wish to develop a more extensive example of a ‘deliberative frame’, both as a theoretical construct and as a research object, as well as to present a possible use of DFA as a qualitative research technique. This example aims to show how one or more fundamental deliberative framings may be detected in an accurate and thoroughly organized deliberative setting. The case considered, which has become a classical experience of deliberation at supranational level, is the deliberative poll of *Tomorrow’s Europe*. This important experiment of deliberative democracy was carried out at the European level in 2007, concluding with a two-day meeting in Brussels involving 367 citizens from 27 different countries. The choice of Tomorrow’s Europe for this analysis – i.e. as an example to illustrate the main features of deliberative frame analysis – is based on the symbolic and organizational importance of this event, as also suggested by its evocative subtitle “The first-ever EU-wide Deliberative Poll”. That said, the same analytical framework may certainly be applied to any other – past or future – deliberative polling event. Moreover, whereas deliberative polling is but one of the numerous existing practises of deliberative democracy, its founding logic is

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focused than discourse analysis, in that its distinctive aim is favouring the emergence of the ‘implicit frames’ to a deliberation.

perfectly congruent with standard assumptions of theories of democratic deliberations, rendering it a viable and fairly generalizable case study for DFA.<sup>11</sup>

To be sure, a possible objection is that, contrary to other deliberative practices, deliberative polling does not aim to reach consensus on the topic discussed among all participants. Secondly, the distinctive structure of deliberative polling, which includes possible feedback between small group discussion, plenary sessions, and final questionnaire completed by individual participants, leaves more room for potential alternative framings to emerge over different stages of the discussion. Both these objections are true. However, as concerns the first argument, we must recall the point made in the first paragraph: procedural fairness is the foundation of the legitimacy of any deliberative outcome, whether its aim is consensus-reaching or opinion formation. This is why thoroughly analyzing the procedure of any deliberative practice appears crucial. Furthermore, the political issue at stake is not less important in the case of deliberative polling, since significant opinion shifts on a given topic can be used to reinforce and legitimize a specific policy option, just like what happens in other (typically consultative) deliberative practices. As regards the second point – the interactive structure of deliberative polling – I will argue in the conclusion that a possible solution to guard against biased framing effects lies in the possibility for reframing that are being offered by the deliberative procedure itself. In this sense, this article does not at all suggest that deliberative polling is an inherently biased tool for deliberation. Rather, the problem is methodological, since *ex-post* deliberative frame analysis is unable to reconstruct the specific dynamics that occurred over the different stages of a past deliberation. For this purpose, participant observation – or a sort of ethnographic account of a given deliberative practice in progress – would probably be necessary.

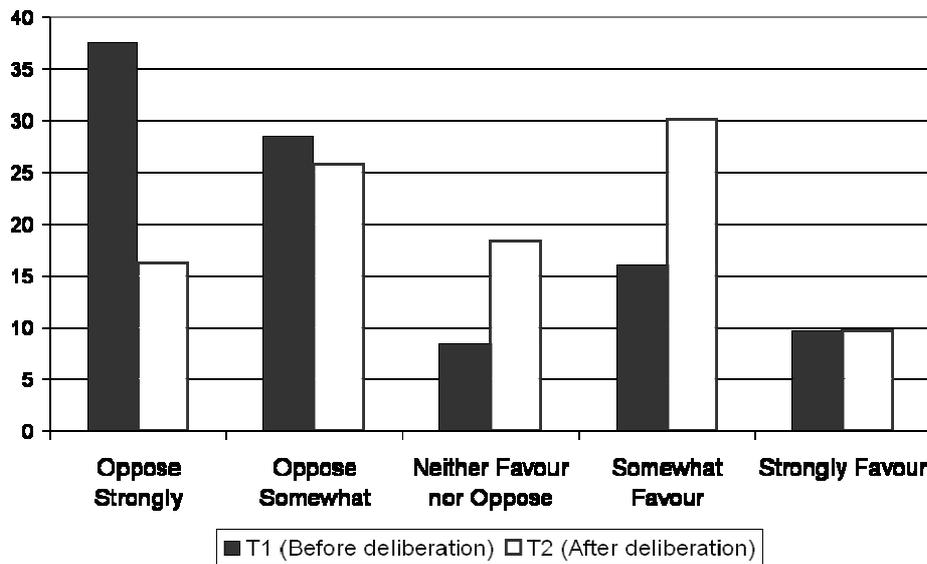
After this necessary premise, we come to the analysis the selected event. At the end of the deliberative process of *Tomorrow's Europe*, a press release presented the overall results of the experiment in the following way, including the title, sub-title, and sub-heading: “First EU-wide Deliberative Poll reveals citizens’ considered preferences”; “EU citizens accept the need for pension reform, resist enlargement”; “As a result of the deliberation, the participants became dramatically more informed and changed their opinions about a number of

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<sup>11</sup> As a reminder, deliberative polling is a type of deliberative experiment founded on a two-fold collection of individuals’ opinions by means of a sample-based survey and a structured questionnaire. The first is carried out by telephone as in an ordinary opinion poll, and the second at the end of a two day deliberation in which a representative sub-sample of the interviewees takes part. Deliberative Polling is also a registered brand name. In the description provided by its promoters, the deliberative survey is “a process of public consultation in which scientific samples are polled before and after they have had a chance to seriously deliberate about the issues” (*Tomorrow's Europe*, Briefing Material, September 2007, p. 26). As a sort of counterfactual experiment, deliberative poll is thus intended by its creators to give a hint of what public opinion on a given issue would be if citizens were given the opportunity to be informed, reflect, and discuss about it for a certain amount of time. The inventor of deliberative polling, James Fishkin, is the author of a number of publications which emphasize the benefits of deliberative surveys for a better quality of public opinion and democracy (Fishkin 1995 and 2009; Fishkin & Luskin 2005).

important issues”. Despite this emphatic presentation, a more detailed analysis of the results shows that: (1) the percentage of correct responses to nine questions on the factual knowledge of the European issues concerned increased by merely 16 percentage points (from 39% to 55% of the sample); (2) of the dozens of opinion questions in the questionnaire, the one that gathered the greatest opinion shift was that relating to pensions reforms, namely, the need to raise the retirement age (Fig. 1).

Fig. 1: Opinions on raising the retirement age, before (T1) and after (T2) the deliberation (percentage values) (N=367).



Source: own elaboration from data published on the website ‘Tomorrow’s Europe’

There is no doubt that the results presented in this figure are significant, because they show that, overall, those against raising the retirement age decreased by 24 points following the deliberation, passing from 66% to 42% of the panel respondents. Although the participants strongly in favour remain unvaried, those who were unsure increased, and those moderately in favour increased even more.

Concerning the causes of this opinion shift, *ad hoc* designed experimental research would be necessary to disentangle the two main competing hypotheses coming into play virtually in any deliberative context: the Habermasian hypothesis of the ‘force of the better argument’ (following a rational discussion within a framework of transparent information, the raising of the retirement age appears to be a right and responsible solution in the collective interest of Europeans), and the (non-Habermasian) hypothesis of the framing effect, according to which the presence in the deliberation of a frame or more frames that are implicitly favourable to this policy solution encourages a change of opinion amongst a segment of the participants. This second hypothesis, in other words, refers to a ‘power of the frame’ that is more insidious (the power) when less

visible (the frame). Again, the idea being supported is that, when faced with an apparently impeccable formal presentation, possibly even in the intentions of the promoters of the deliberative poll, the implicit frames of the deliberation may be far from being neutral, thus strongly pre-structuring and seriously biasing the collective decision-making process on the issue considered.

As a consequence, what a DFA can usefully do is obviously not to measure the impact of framing effects on the participants' opinions, but to assess whether the contextual and discursive conditions of a deliberative practice meet or violate some of the basic requirements for the fulfilment of the 'force of the better argument' hypothesis. In other words, it may come to refute the latter hypothesis by revealing the absence of its very conditions of possibility. Fishkin himself (2009, 34, 126-7, 160) repeatedly lists five conditions for quality deliberation, especially in relation to the case of deliberative polling. Among these, the first three appear strictly related to the problem of the deliberative frame: a) *information*, i.e., the participants' access to accurate information that is supposed to be relevant to the issue; b) *substantive balance* between the considerations for and against each of the viewpoints and perspectives on the issue; and c) *diversity* of participants representing a range of viewpoints and the major positions in the public about the issue. In contrast, the last two conditions (*conscientiousness* and *equal consideration*) concern more particularly the participants' conduct in the deliberative experiment. Through DFA, we shall be able to observe whether the three frame-related conditions for quality deliberation are basically satisfied or violated, as regards both the organizational setting and the information material that pre-structure the whole deliberative process.

### (1) *Organizational setting and deliberative meta-frame*

Starting from the recognition of the organizational setting, a first generic frame emerging is what can simply be defined as an 'institutional European' meta-frame.<sup>12</sup> What counts, in this case, is the purely formal and defining dimension of the framing device: the institutional framework and the selection of legitimate options appear to be sufficient to define the problem and suggest the need for a solution, if not the specific solution. Indeed, even before the content of the information material available for use by the participants is considered, the fundamental elements of the deliberative setting already appear to establish the 'diagnosis' and invoke a 'prognosis'.

Whereas it represents one of the institutional actors holding, together with national governments, a potential decisional power with respect to pension reform policies, the European Commission could easily be seen, in relation to deliberative practices, as just one actor amongst others with its contingent policy objectives (such as, for example, the search for budgetary control measures).<sup>13</sup> Therefore, in a differently – and, we suggest, procedurally more fairly – organized deliberative experience, the representatives of the European institutions could

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<sup>12</sup> A 'technocratic' meta-frame might be a more effective name were it not for its negative implications.

<sup>13</sup> The information document does not hide the fact that 'in the field of pensions, the EU encourages raising employment in old age' (p.16).

have been hosted as simple stakeholders, witnesses, or experts alongside representatives of the pensioners' unions, academics (economists, sociologists, political scientists), professional experts, political party and association representatives, and other members of civil society – that is, alongside most policy-relevant actors constituting the 'interpretive community' (Yanow 2000) for this specific policy space. In contrast, the European institutions played, although indirectly, the role of promoters of the initiative and 'definers' of the deliberative meta-frame, presenting the power both to host the participants in the formers' institutional offices in Brussels, and to select the representatives of the viewpoints admitted in the discursive arena, and therefore considered as legitimate. Four MEPs belonging to four different groups, of the eight present in the European parliament, were consulted for the selection and presentation of the arguments and counterarguments offered to the participants in the briefing material. Amongst the four, there were no groups holding positions and policy options presumably outside the spectrum of 'legitimacy' from the European Commission's point of view.<sup>14</sup>

## (2) *Information materials and deliberative frames*

Secondly, the more substantive, content-related frames emerge from a systematic analysis of the briefing document upon which group discussions were held and questions were formulated, to be forwarded to policy experts in the plenary session (see the document, pp. 14-15, downloadable at the following address: <http://cdd.stanford.edu/docs/2007/eu/eu-dpoll-ENG.pdf>). Based on a categorization proposed by Semetko and Valkenburg (2000) in reference to the more common types of frame in the field of media studies and political communication (*news frames*), the substantive deliberative framing that emerges from frame analysis can be defined as one of 'economic consequences'.

This frame also appears neither immediately nor entirely explicitly. The generic title 'Challenges and opportunities' is followed, in fact, by a balanced brief illustration of the main pensions systems. Moreover, a column entitled 'Facts' shows some data on the demographic evolution of Europe, and two final questions allude to costs and taxes, as well as to the subject of poverty amongst the elderly. Furthermore, the subsequent page, where four different, possible

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<sup>14</sup> The four MEPs came respectively from: the Group of the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe; the Europe of freedom and democracy Group; Greens/ European Free Alliance Group; the Group of the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats in the European Parliament. As well as the European People's Party group, the Union for a Europe of Nations Group, the Confederal Group of European United Left and the Identity, Tradition, Sovereignty Group, as a consequence, were not submitted the draft material. Besides these political representatives, other institutional actors, academically-oriented think tanks and civil society organizations contributed to this document: the European Council on Foreign Relations, Euractiv, the Center for European Policy Studies, the Institutul European din România, the Centre for public policy PROVIDUS, the Center for Liberal Strategies, Nyt Europa, Real Instituto Elcano de Estudios Internacionales, E3G. The document was originally drafted by Notre Europe, an organization which defines itself as "a think tank committed to European integration" and "was founded in 1996 by Jacques Delors to think a united Europe" (<http://www.notre-europe.eu/en/about-us/charter/>). More generally, Notre Europe also initiated and coordinated the whole Tomorrow's Europe event.

approaches to the pensions problem are set out, also appears to be inspired by a principle of ‘pluralistic equilibrium’, particularly in the presentation method that, for each of the approaches, compares the arguments ‘for’ and ‘against’ in two different columns.

Despite these apparent elements of formal correctness, the terms in which the participants are invited to consider the problem come out to be, on deeper analysis, those of the unsustainable ‘economic consequences’ that the non-raising of the retirement age are presumably destined to produce for the European budget, as well as on the stability of the pension system itself.

This emerges, above all, from the definition of the problem as proposed in the three introductory sentences: “As Europeans live longer and have less children, Europe is facing a challenge: it is ageing. This will have serious implications for the economy, as fewer working people will support the costs of pensions and the healthcare of pensioners”. A sound connection between two concepts, population ageing and sustainability of the pensions system, is thus established from the beginning, inhibiting the participants from thinking about pensions in terms different from those suggested by this specific deliberative frame to the issue.

In addition, the ‘Facts’ column – similarly to the logic of journalism, the appeal to facts always invokes some sort of claim to objectivity – cannot help but be entirely selective. The only two facts considered as ‘relevant information’ to the participants concern the relative reduction in the population of a working age and the estimates regarding the ageing of the overall population.

Ultimately, there is an explicit reference to the need to “avoid unbearably high contributions and tax rates” in the final question. The ‘derivative’ dimension of the framing process is therefore facilitated by an unambiguous indication of the prospects of ‘loss’ in case a consequential treatment is not applied.

Moreover, in the subsequent table of ‘different approaches’, at least four problematic elements that transcend a specific assessment of the (usually highly satisfactory) formal correctness in the presentation of each single approach should be noted:

(a) The selected approaches are presented as possible ‘solutions’: it is repeated that there is a problem and that the cause is demographic and economic (too many pensioners are costly); it is taken for granted that this must be tackled by reform; one non-penalizing solution (the first) and three penalizing solutions (the second, third, and fourth) are proposed for pensioners, to whom the responsibility for the expected lack of sustainability is implicitly attributed.

(b) The four – no more, no less – approaches automatically acquire equal legitimacy due to the mere fact of being set alongside each other with an equal amount of space and equal treatment amongst the possible solutions. Categorization of the possible policy approaches appears indeed as a highly arbitrary process, involving both selection (inclusion, exclusion, and emphasis) and the location of relevant cutting points.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> For instance, the first approach is presented under the general category of ‘demographic solutions’. However, it could easily have been split into two or three different policy approaches,

(c) Qualitative content analysis<sup>16</sup> reveals that, in the text illustrating the arguments for and against the four approaches, lexical choices largely contribute to establishing a discourse in terms of efficiency, productivity, economic growth, and public finances. In this sense, the language and wording of arguments reinforce an overall economic framing of the issue under deliberation.

(d) Of the 18 arguments proposed, only the last 4, placed at the end of the document, evoke framings of ‘justice’ (“If pensions are cut when people worked hard and expected them that is unfair”), of ‘human costs’ (“Some workers need to retire early, because of work pressure or heavy physical demands”), of ‘risky choice’ or other personal consequences (“others [workers] invest badly and end in poverty”; “Private funding [...] induces risks that are too high”). As a result, another typical news frame, such as that of ‘human interest’, and an even more emblematic decisional framing, such as the ‘loss’ frame (Tversky & Kahneman 1981), remain in an entirely marginal position in the briefing material, overshadowed by the inclusive ‘economic consequences’ frame.<sup>17</sup>

Finally, the emerging ‘economic consequences’ frame – at a different analytical level, this type of frame would be categorized in the media studies literature as a ‘generic’ frame, as opposed to an ‘issue-specific’ (De Vreese & Semetko 2004) or ‘unique’ (Borah 2011) frame – might be translated into a more distinctive frame to the issue of this deliberation, which may be called an ‘inexorable sacrifice’ frame. Indeed, the ultimate meta-message that applies to the overall reading of the briefing material about the pensions issue tends to suggest that the policy reform in question, which is raising the retirement age, simply cannot be avoided, and that no other realistic option would prevent the whole pension system from undergoing very severe consequences.

In conclusion of this part, one may notice that, even if the messages maintained by the ‘economic consequences’ and the ‘inexorable sacrifice’ frames happened to genuinely represent the ‘best arguments’ in that specific political arena,<sup>18</sup> normative questions would arise about the ultimate meaning of deliberation: should its aim be a procedurally controlled formation of general will, or the search for wider public agreement, or more efficient problem solving, or the development and expression of considered judgments? Or should deliberation

by setting apart (and thus giving more importance to) each of the following solutions: encouraging a higher birth rate; encouraging immigration; encouraging mobility within the EU.

<sup>16</sup> The use of a qualitative data analysis software was not necessary, given the briefness of the material dedicated to each policy issue – i.e. pensions, jobs, EU enlargement, etc, as well as the merely illustrative nature of this exploratory case study.

<sup>17</sup> Similarly, to apply another important categorization in the literature on framing, the *Tomorrow’s Europe* frame appears to be entirely ‘thematic’, without any concessions to an ‘episodic’ type of framing – such as those that dominate the news media, where problems are consistently traced back to a concrete narrative dimension, with references to news episodes and the ‘flesh and blood’ protagonists, thereby facilitating the attribution of responsibility (or of rights) at a more personalised level (Iyengar 1991). More generally, one might say that the framing of *Tomorrow’s Europe* deliberative poll relates much more to a ‘system-level’ (or ‘macro’) frame than to an ‘individual-level’ (or ‘micro’) one.

<sup>18</sup> Captured in a slogan, the message is “working to age 70 is good public policy” (Jerbi 2006, 26). See also *The Economist* (April 9<sup>th</sup>-15<sup>th</sup> 2011) including a special report on pensions and the general cover on “70 or bust! Why the retirement age must go up”.

primarily be intended as a procedure to favour the people's acceptance of policy solutions pre-deliberated by the institutional and organizational elite?

***Conclusion: reframing and counterframing as contextual moderators of deliberative framing effects***

In the example above, it appears through deliberative frame analysis that contextual and discursive conditions for the 'force of the better argument' hypothesis are seriously violated. Concerning the issue of 'framing effects', however, the scholarly literature offers very uncertain indications on the effectiveness and the magnitude of the frames' impact both on individual and on group-level decision-making processes (Iyengar 1991; Zaller & Feldman 1992; Price & Tewksbury 1997; Druckman 2001; Scheufele & Tewksbury 2007; Barisione 2009), even in experimental contexts that are very similar to those of the deliberative arena.

In contrast, what appears sufficiently clear is that framing effects are 'conditional' effects, in that they take place in some cases and not in others, according to the conditions relating to the quality and pervasiveness of a given frame, but also to those relating to the characteristics both of the context and the public. These conditional factors are known as *moderators* (or moderating factors) of framing effects (Chong & Druckman 2007).

In particular, what appears crucial with respect to the relationship between framing processes and deliberative practices is the role of the *contextual* moderators of framing effects.<sup>19</sup> Amongst the characteristics of the communicative context that may act as 'contextual' moderators of the framing effect, what appears to be most significant in the light of recent experimental results (Sniderman & Theriault 2004; Borah 2011) is the presence of 'competing frames'. If it is true, for example, that a 'freedom of speech' frame renders the public's responses more tolerant, a 'public order' frame renders them more authoritarian. However, the simultaneous presence of these two opposing frames within the same communications context would appear to neutralize the overall framing effect.

Following this important indication about the moderating function of genuinely conflicting frames on overall framing effects, what a correct deliberative context appears to require is the absence of a 'monopolistic' frame or,

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<sup>19</sup> A different question relates to the 'individual' moderators of the framing or, in other words, the socio-demographic or psycho-political variables which render the participants differently susceptible to the influence of the decisional frames. Amongst other variables considered by psycho-social research on inter-group or inter-individual discussions (Mendelberg 2002), the following alternatives appear to be particularly significant: the common/independent destinies of the participants; the objective of reaching a consensus/mere exchange of information on a group's fixed preferences; the emphasis on group identity/group interest; equal/unequal number of group members, cooperative/conflict environment. Other central phenomena of group dynamics, albeit less directly linked to the question of the deliberative frame, obviously relate to such aspects as leadership, polarization, or social pressure (Setälä et al. 2010).

to use Goffman's words, the presence of a fundamental 'frame dispute', in which the participants actually ask themselves "what is it that's going on here?" without taking for granted the definition of the situation, or the idea of what is at stake, as suggested by the deliberative elite, and will thus be susceptible to challenge the frame that has been offered to them. In Rein and Schön's (1993, 163) terms, it is 'frame reflection' that makes a shift of frame possible to occur. In other words, the possibility for *reframing*, or achieving a new/competing definition of the deliberative frame, depends on the contextual conditions allowing (or not allowing) participants to critically reflect around the frame that regulates a discussion – a sort of "reflecting in action" that happens when participants "reflect on and learn about the game of policy making even as they play it" (Schön & Rein 1994, 37).

In this perspective, even a state of uncertainty and indeterminacy in given deliberative contexts, including those aiming to achieve a consensus, such as citizen juries, can paradoxically assume a positive role, at least in the initial phase of the deliberation, in which it may be opportune for the participants to ask themselves, for example, if "the issue under discussion is basically techno-scientific or social" or if it is "primarily concerned with the effectiveness or with the equity of the regulations, or rather with their symbolic value" (Pellizzoni 2007, 116). Even an excessive plurality of frames, ultimately, is expected to be more effective, for the purposes of a deliberation less exposed to the influence of the deliberative framing, than the presence of a single or largely dominant frame. In this sense, and if inspired by an authentically pluralistic approach, public deliberation itself becomes, by its very nature, an efficient moderator of the framing effect, to the extent that it generates a procedure that contrasts truly different perspectives (Bohman 2006) and potentially conflicting value orientations (Gastil et al. 2010), and therefore authentic 'counterframes', instead of presenting an array of arguments and counterarguments framed throughout a unique political, social, or cultural perspective.<sup>20</sup> If, in sum, framing affects (i.e., distorts) deliberation, the opposite also seems possible: deliberation affects (i.e., neutralizes) framing.

On a normative level, and in operational terms, deliberative experiences could benefit appreciably from the presence of independent policy analysts and/or communication scholars who encourage participants to take into account other possible terms in which the issue under consideration can be thought of – i.e., other competing deliberative frames, or *counterframes*. The presence of this sort of 'reframers', particularly at a first stage of the deliberation, may represent an important guarantee that the preference formation and/or decision-making processes are not, even unwillingly, biased in favour of a specific policy solution, due to presence of a quasi-monopolistic or highly dominant deliberative frame.

In this respect, a simple starting rule that might be applied to the definition of any deliberative event consists in asking the following question: "in what different terms might this topic be thought about?". This intellectual exercise also

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<sup>20</sup> According to the more optimist, "deliberation enhances opinion quality – it eliminates elite framing influence that some see as akin to manipulation" (Druckman & Nelson 2003, 742).

seems to be a very practical prerequisite for conducting an unbiased deliberation. As a tentative set of more operational steps, facilitators designing an event might start by: (1) drawing on the widest range of individual and collective actors (policy experts, political parties, think tanks, academics, trade unions, civil society organizations, etc.) each of which possibly holds a different viewpoint on the given topic; (2) consulting with them in order to identify their own specific way of framing the topic to be discussed; (3) mapping the different fundamental framings – sometimes there will be only two or three – which have emerged from this preliminary recognition; (4) designing the organizational setting – especially the selection of plenary session guests – so as to include diverse institutional and/or civil society representatives for each frame at stake; (5) involving these different players in the production of information materials, in order to secure the visibility of each fundamental frame from the briefing stage of the deliberation onwards.

On a scientific level – simultaneously, and also to overcome the possible limitations of the present contribution – the research agenda should primarily focus on two crucial aspects of the relationship between framing and deliberation: frame production in the deliberative process, analysing how a given deliberative frame, resulting from the interaction among the different actors (organizers, stakeholders, experts, sponsors, moderators, participants) involved in a deliberation, comes to dominate the group discussion; and framing effects in the presence of genuinely competing deliberative frames, given the scarcity of research concerning the effects of ‘mixed’ (or competing) frames even in the wider field of communication studies (Borah 2011).<sup>21</sup>

To be sure, an approach to the deliberative process that encourages participants to interact reflexively about the frames lying beneath deliberation requires some demanding preconditions, first among which is the actual availability of the deliberative elites and sponsoring institutions to challenge their viewpoint on the topic of the experiment. However, this appears the first, and perhaps the most fundamental, node to be resolved for the logical wire between procedural fairness and claim to legitimacy to be reconnected within the deliberative process.

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<sup>21</sup> A recent meta-analysis of research on framing effects (Borah 2011, 257) significantly concluded that “questions such as whether competing frames cancel each other and reinforce existing values, push individuals in conflicting directions, or increase motivation for more careful evaluations of the alternatives (Chong & Druckman 2007) are germane for future research”.

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