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Poorly designed deliberation: explaining the *banlieues*' non-involvement in the Great Debate

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In 2019, the French Government organized a wide public consultation named the Great Debate. Promoted as a deliberative practice that could bring together various segments of society, it was characterized by feeble involvement of the people living in the *banlieues* – densely populated, economically marginalized, socially deprived and ethno-culturally different peripheral areas of large cities. This article aims to explain the reasons for which people in the *banlieues* of Paris did not participate in the Great Debate. Drawing on in-depth interviews and one focus group conducted in the spring of 2019, we distinguish between four main causes of non-participation: the re-legitimation function of the debate, its lack of inclusiveness, mismatch of demands, and format of the deliberative setting.

Keywords: Deliberation; involvement; periphery; inclusiveness; France

Introduction

The last two decades have marked an increase in the use of deliberative practices around the world. Intended to grant citizens an active role in the decision making process, such practices complement representative democracy and may contribute to the legitimacy of the political system (Dryzek 2001; Parkinson 2006). The principles of deliberation can be fulfilled and its value augmented when people agree to engage in the process (Fishkin 2011). In this sense, one of the important challenges to deliberation is how to ensure greater participation. Extensive research is devoted to what happens once people participate in deliberation. Known as input legitimacy, the idea behind who participates in deliberation has been often analyzed along the lines of inclusive or representative participation (Smith 2009; Geissel and Gherghina 2016; Reuchamps and Caluwaerts 2018).

However, it is less obvious what makes people decline participation in deliberation. With several notable exceptions (Neblo et al., 2010; Webb 2013; Jacquet 2017), we know little about why citizens do not get involved in deliberation. It is important to understand why people decline the involvement in a process that can provide avenues to express opinions and shape policies. It is counter-intuitive that people do not take advantage of such opportunities in the context of high public demand and level of support for

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deliberation in contemporary societies (Christensen and von Schoultz 2019; Bedock and Pilet 2020; Gherghina and Geissel 2020). The refusal to engage with this new mode of political participation may be relevant to understand better the persistence of a gap between citizens and political institutions.

Our article addresses this gap in the literature and aims to explain why citizens living in the Paris *banlieues* did not participate to the Great Debate (*le Grand Débat*), the broad consultation initiated by the French President Macron in 2019. Promoted as a deliberative practice that could bring together various segments of society, the Great Debate was characterized by feeble involvement of the people living in the *banlieues*. *Banlieues* are densely populated, economically marginalized, socially deprived and ethno-culturally different peripheral areas of large cities. Our study focuses on the *banlieues* of Paris for three reasons: it is the capital city where state institutions are located (the organizers of the deliberation), which makes the citizens' engagement more accessible in theory; its *banlieues* have an established history of protest and violence (Lapeyronnie 2006); and many of the riots that generated the emergence of the Great Debate took place in Paris. We use seven in-depth interviews and one focus group with eight respondents, conducted in the spring of 2019.

The results of our analysis indicate the existence of four main causes of non-participation: the re-legitimation function of the debate, its lack of inclusiveness, mismatch of demands, and format of the deliberative setting. We contribute to the existing literature in two ways. First, we show that non-involvement is based on a thorough knowledge of the process. It is not rooted in ignorance but is a conscious decision. Second, we illustrate that the citizens in the *banlieues* declined participation for issues related to the aims, design and content of the deliberation. We contribute to the existing research by nuancing and complementing previous explanations that explain non-participation more through self-perception of the ability to participate in decision-making or priority given to private life. We show that the problems of the deliberative process are the main triggers for non-involvement as opposed to the lack of interest that is often mentioned in the literature.

The remainder of this article proceeds as follows. The first section reviews the literature on the determinants of non-participation in deliberation. Next, we briefly outline the research design with emphasis on the data and methods for collection and analysis. The third section describes the emergence of the Great Debate and the surrounding context. The fourth section presents the main findings of our qualitative analysis. The discussions and conclusions summarize the key results and discuss the main implications of our study on the broader idea of non-participation in deliberation.

Reasons to decline participation in deliberation

Earlier research reveals that people do not participate in deliberative settings for two major categories of reasons. On the one hand, there are causes related to individual preferences and to the ways in which citizens view their roles, priorities and abilities to engage in the public sphere. On the other hand, there are causes related to the perception of the limited output of deliberation on the political system.

To begin with individual preferences, one classic argument is that citizens do not wish to get involved in the decision-making process and do not strive to provide more input to those who make political decisions (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2002). However, this perspective is contradicted by empirical evidence from different political settings. Deliberative democracy is used increasingly in decision-making processes to complement

representative democracy and receives quite extensive public support (Warren and Pearse 2008; Neblo et al., 2010; Bächtiger et al. 2018; Bedock and Pilet 2020; Gherghina and Geissel 2020).

Several studies refined and explored in detail the idea of individual preferences. Some refer to the dichotomy between private and public sphere. Citizens do not engage in deliberation when they concentrate on the private sphere and prefer spending time with family, friends or at the workplace rather than engaging in the public arena (Jacquet 2017). Citizens may also consider political views as being private and thus are reluctant to express them in public (Neblo et al., 2010). The same applies when there are conflicts of schedule in which deliberative events overlap with activities planned in the private sphere (Jacquet 2017). One of the main reasons citizens do not want to deliberate is that they are too busy (Neblo et al., 2010). The latter refers to how occupied citizens are to a large extent with what happens in their private lives. Also related to this distinction between private and public is the idea that some citizens avoid group situations, are reluctant to speak in public and they dislike the idea of being judged by others (Jacquet 2017).

Moreover, there are people who are conflict-averse and that drives their opposition toward deliberation (Neblo et al., 2010) since they perceive the existence of a conflict as being inherent to deliberation, especially when it is carried out around political differences or salient issues (Mutz 2006). Deliberation is argument-driven and some citizens are better at articulating their thoughts in rational terms (Sanders 1997). The emphasis on rationality often favors people with higher-economic status and may lead to conflicts. There are segments in society that seek to avoid political arguments and would prefer not to justify their beliefs to those with whom they disagree (Webb 2013). Furthermore, individuals may feel that politics cannot be discussed rationally and this raises doubts about engaging in deliberation (Neblo et al., 2010). Instead, deliberation can lead to face-to-face conflictual situations that give rise to strong emotions such as anger and resentment (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2002), which may be detrimental to a free exchange of ideas.

The way people feel about their ability to participate is another relevant driver of participation. Some have a perception of low competence and expertise regarding the topics or inability to meaningfully engage in decision-making. This internal political inefficacy will make them decline participation (Neblo et al., 2010; Webb 2013; Jacquet 2017).

Another main reason for which citizens decline participating in deliberation is because they perceive it to have a limited impact on the political system. Overall, those citizens who assess the potential impact of deliberation as marginal or negative are likely to stay away from it. The generalized rejection of political activities, the feeling of powerlessness and the idea that deliberation may be manipulated can make citizens refuse deliberation (Jacquet 2017). The belief that deliberation does not lead to binding decisions pushes citizens away (Neblo et al., 2010). In theory, there is a possibility to institutionalize the use of deliberation and make the mini publics gain weight in the representative political system. This can occur through several means such as providing mini-publics opportunities to scrutinize decisions ex-post or suspensive veto powers for mini-publics (Setälä 2017). The practical application of these instances could diminish the perception that deliberation is powerless in contemporary systems of representation. According to all these arguments, non-participation may be seen as a rational and conscious decision.

Research design

We seek to understand which of the two categories of determinants influenced the decision of the citizens in the Paris *banlieues* to decline participation in the Great Debate. To this

end, we conducted seven semi-structured interviews (for a profile of participants, see Appendix 1) and one focus group with eight participants (Appendix 2). None of the participants were involved in the Great Debate at any stage. The data was collected in the peripheral area of Paris in February and March 2019, when the proceedings of the Great debate were in progress. The interviews were taken in Saint-Denis (4) and in Argenteuil (3), two major cities (larger than 100,000 inhabitants) in the Northern periphery of Paris. The focus group was organized in Noisy-le-Grand, a medium-size city (larger than 70,000 inhabitants) in the Eastern suburbs of Paris.

Our study combines two methods of qualitative data collection to gauge both the individual views, observations and motivations (from interviews), and group dynamics and its potential influence on the individuals' opinions about the issues discussed (from the focus group). This approach provides a broader understanding of the motivations, enhances the data richness and increases the robustness of results (Lambert and Loisel 2008; Silverman 2015). The combination of the two methods is consistent with the research strategy proposed by earlier research (Creswell and Creswell 2017).

The selection of respondents for both the interviews and focus group took into consideration gender balance, and ethnic, age, religious and social diversity. Nevertheless, the interviewees and the focus group participants are not representative of the entire French *banlieue* population. It is impossible to obtain a representative sample as the general population is unknown. This is because French census data does not include ethnic and religious characteristics. The participants in the focus group did not know each other before. We recruited the interviewees and focus group participants with the help of local contacts. One month before the field research, we contacted five local NGO and initiative group leaders who asked in their neighborhoods (e.g. during the building administration committee meetings) about people who did not participate to the Great Debate. Two initial groups of 23 persons for the interviews and 26 for the focus group were randomly selected. Out of these, we selected 11 persons for the interviews and 12 for two focus groups based on the following criteria: their intention to take part in the face-to-face interview or focus group, no political commitments, and no prior contact with each other. In the end, only seven respondents were willing and available to answer the interview questions and eight were present for the focus group. The 15 respondents vary greatly with respect to their interest and prior engagement in politics. The last column in Appendices 1 and 2 shows their political experience: no voters (those who never voted in elections), first time voters (those who voted only in the most recent French elections, the 2017 presidential race), occasional voters, and usual voters.

The questionnaire guides used for interviews and focus group was intended to outline the opinions and beliefs about the Great Debate and to identify the reasons for participants' lack of involvement in this deliberative practice. The guides also included questions aiming to reflect the saliency of issues approached by the deliberation, the individual perceptions about the quality and potential outcomes of the Great Debate or the relation between social status, ethnic origin or *banlieue* identity and the likelihood to participate to the Great Debate. The interviews and focus group were conducted in French, all the questions are available in Appendix 3 for interviews and in Appendix 4 for the focus group. The average duration of interviews was 40 min. The duration of the focus group was 125 min.

We use inductive thematic analysis to understand the reasons for which the residents of *banlieues* did not engage in the Great Debate. We followed and applied systematically the three stages of inductive thematic analysis (Warren and Karner 2014). First, we familiarized ourselves with the answers provided by the interviewees and focus group

participants and identified several directions for data analysis. This was necessary to inform the organization of data, which is the second stage. We used the sentences as units of analysis and organized them into specific codes associated with what we knew from the literature. For example, one code was ‘manipulation’ and we assigned to it all the sentences in which respondents referred to actions intended to create this outcome. Third, we connected these codes and created larger themes that help answer our research question. We ended up with four major themes: legitimization, inclusiveness, demands, and format and outcomes. Each of these themes are discussed in detail in the results section of the paper. Let us now briefly describe the ways in which the Great Debate emerged and developed in 2019.

The emergence and context for the Great Debate

The Great Debate was announced by the French President Macron in the last days of 2018 as a wide public consultation to create popular consensus over the main guidelines of the major societal reforms to be implemented. This did not happen in a normal context. On the contrary, as Macron himself observed in the discourse announcing the event, many Frenchmen were ‘dissatisfied or angry’ (Macron 2019). The President’s statement came after a three-month period of intense protests, unrest, blockades, occupations, confrontations and violence that resulted from the clash between the Yellow Vests movement and the law enforcement forces (Chamorel 2019). Since the Great Debate was a direct response to the turmoil created by the Yellow Vests movement, we briefly introduce the movement before discussing the consultation.

From the outset, one of the most salient features of the Yellow Vests movement was its eclectic character. The starting point was the intention of the government to raise the fuel prices by introducing a new anti-pollution tax (Grossman 2019). The protesters’ claims rapidly multiplied from denouncing a measure that would disproportionately affect the working and middle classes to a wider set of demands. The latter include the reinstatement of the solidarity tax on wealth, the adoption of a constitutional reform allowing for the Citizens’ initiative referendums or the increase of the minimum wage (Mișcoiu 2020). After the first violent interactions with the authorities, the protesters asked for Macron’s resignation and the proclamation of a Sixth Republic (Grossman 2019; Grunberg 2019). The degree of violence used both by the protesters and especially by the police encouraged on one hand the radicalization of the movement and its consequent desertion by numerous Frenchmen who did not agree with its violent turn (Deléage 2019).

From a sociological perspective, many protesters involved in the Yellow Vests movement come from the mid-urban or the rural areas. However, there was a general concern especially among social scientists about the fact that only very few of them came from the areas with large immigration (Ahmed et al. 2019; Geisser 2019). The towns and neighborhoods with large numbers of immigrants – especially those belonging to the ‘visible minorities’ – did not rise as they did in 2005. Back then, the movement originated from the clashes between the police and a local community situated in the Parisian periphery following the accidental death of a youngster of Northern African origin and degenerated into long-lasting protests and upheavals of the *banlieue*, with the issue of discrimination and mistreatment of the non-European people playing a central role (Haddad and Balz 2006). As such, the movement gave the feeling that was mainly driven by the native Frenchmen who felt abandoned by the state (McAuley 2019; Vermeren 2019).

The Great Debate was intended as a response to the Yellow Vests and as an inclusive societal consultation. The latter built on the major critiques brought to the Yellow Vests

according to which there was a lack of representativeness and inclusiveness (Euvé 2019). President Macron conceived the Great Debate as an ample mechanism. He appointed two ministers, five national ‘guardians’, 40 commissioners and 104 territorial facilitators who had to organize and oversee the debate. A web platform accessed by almost three million people was installed, more than 10,000 local meetings were reportedly held all over France, four national thematic conferences, two debates in the French Senate and in the National Assembly, and 21 citizens’ ‘consultative-deliberative’ reunions took place. As a result, almost two million contributions were uploaded on the web platform concerning essentially the four thematic fields proposed by the government: environment transition, taxation and budgets, the state and the public services, and democracy and citizenry. In total, the conveners analyzed 630,000 pages of ideas and contributions and synthesized them in a 1500-page document (Website Great Debate 2019).

In spite of these impressive figures, the Great Debate was criticized by the opposition parties, by the labor unions, and by many intellectuals and civic association representatives as being the opposite of what was advertised. For example, in terms of representativeness, ‘the middle class, people with higher education and pensioners are usually over-represented in such settings while lower classes are under-represented’ (Ehs and Mokre 2020). The people living in the *banlieues*, who have a completely different socio-demographic profile, were allegedly underrepresented. In terms of procedures, some observers noted a series of problems: the online platforms could not prevent individuals from posting their opinions more than once, poor assurance of fair access to information prior to the debates, poor equality of conditions needed for the free exchange of opinions, and the reporting of biased conveners and facilitators (Bennani, Gandré, and Monnery 2020). The voices from civil society argued against the design and duration of the consultation, raising issues related to neutrality, transparency and deliberative quality (de Feraudy 2019).

The way the debates were synthesized in the final 1500 pages led to accusations of lack of professionalism, intentional omission and biased interpretation (Fleury and Morel 2019). Overall, these developments indicate a major concern among social scientists, public activists and opposition politicians about the fact that people in the *banlieues* were underrepresented both in the Yellow Vests movement and in the Great Debate. The latter, promoted as the largest public deliberation ever conducted in France, was criticized for not mirroring the French society and for not covering a series of important issues (Buge and Morio 2019). It was also criticized for orienting the proceedings and the political solutions toward some pre-settled options (Ehs and Mokre 2020).

Understanding why the *banlieues* did not engage

Before presenting and interpreting the results, we reflect briefly on the meaning of *banlieue*. We keep the original term in the paper because the *banlieues* in France are autonomous administrative entities, which takes them beyond the usual meaning for ‘suburbs’ – the literal translation of the term – in other countries. Equally important, the *banlieues* have acquired over time their own social, ethnic, cultural and economic identity that make them a distinct unit in French society.

Defining the *banlieue*

The *banlieue* is a complex and somewhat controversial concept among French social scientists (Vieillard-Baron 2011). Many researchers agree that the peripheral areas of

large cities are very diverse in terms of concentration of population, administrative autonomy, connectedness with the closest large city, wealth, social capital or share of immigrants. During the last decades, there has been an overwhelming trend to use the term to describe the peripheral urban areas built during the industrial age as satellites of the French major cities (such as Paris, Lyon, or Marseille). Since the 1980s, these have become increasingly problematic in terms of development, security, sanitation, transportation, and access to social, health and education services (Maurin 2004). Consequently, the *banlieue* is a peripheral area where the living conditions have almost continuously degraded and where the inhabitants face serious challenges in satisfying average or even basic needs (Vieillard-Baron 2000).

The term has been discursively associated with attributes such as ‘sensitive’ or ‘difficult’, while the authorities have tried to repair the situation by creating ‘priority action areas’ (Miscoiu 2007). The only notable result was the entrenchment of another concept with negative connotation, intimately related to *banlieue*: the zone (*la Zone*), which designates the no-hope neighborhoods or the ‘really lost’ *banlieue* (Baudin and Genestier 2002). A relevant feature of the *banlieue* is that while the proportion of the immigrant population varies, the common social perception is that the percentage of the citizens who have foreign ancestry is much higher than the average (Miscoiu 2005). Moreover, the non-European residents of the *banlieues* – euphemistically called ‘visible minorities’ – are much more numerous than elsewhere in France (Avenel 2009).

The perception of re-legitimization

The first theme identified in the answers provided by the interviewees and focus group participants is legitimacy. More precisely, the respondents referred to the Great Debate as a process of re-legitimization of state institutions. They perceived this deliberation as a hasty response to the Yellow Vests movement; a government move to calm down the protesters. The respondents did not consider the event as a genuine effort to identify the need for new reforms based on citizens’ views and demands as they could be formulated during the debate.

The interviews and the focus group revealed a general mistrust in the government. Almost all our respondents indicated a solid conviction that the Great Debate was above all an operation meant to bring some legitimacy and popularity to a government facing severe social unrest. Two interviewees explicitly mentioned the lack of government credibility as a driver for such a debate: ‘ready to do whatever it takes to simulate that they care about the people’ (ON) and ‘cynically trying to commute the responsibility of making decisions on the shoulders of regular citizens’ (LR).

Macron’s effort to regain credibility is clearly identified by some interviewees as the main reason for organizing the Great Debate. For one of our interviewees, ‘it is rare in history to have such a contested government [...] and this explains why they organized this charade: to make them look better’ (SK). Or, in the words of another interviewee, ‘[...] while nobody but a tiny elite still supports the President, he badly needed to find a way to recover his lost popularity and the so-called Great Debate was his lifebuoy’ (JPH). Consequently, one real problem of the Great Debate was that it had ‘pre-settled outcomes’ and was organized mainly in order to legitimize some ‘already prepared solutions, which suited the government’ (LR).

The discussions during the focus group strengthened the idea that many of our respondents see the Great Debate as a ‘trap’, intended to ‘fool those who still believe that the institutions are made for the people’ (WB). Several respondents agreed with the explicit

statement of one of our focus group participants: ‘Restoring the trust in Macron and in his system through participating to the Great Debate would mean reinforcing the domination of the elites over us’ (MFH). In this context, ‘us’ is a reflection of the *banlieue* identity. In this sense, four out of the seven interviewees and four participants in the focus group defined themselves as ‘inhabitants of the banlieue, facing the same challenges’ (TP), being ‘marginalized and ignored’ (AK). In spite of their different socio-demographic profiles, the respondents share a sense of belonging to the geo-socio-economic area of the *banlieue*, which puts them in a position to stand against the ‘operation of gross manipulation set-up by those who are in power’ (AA).

The poor ethnocultural inclusiveness

The second theme was that of inclusiveness. This is linked with the idea of identity that has been introduced by the previous sub-section. Those who live in the *banlieues* have a non-European cultural identity; many are Muslims and descend from families born in a former French colony. Living there was seen by most respondents as an ‘obstacle for a full integration in the mainstream French society’ (SK). The set-up of the Great Debate presupposed a ‘pre-existing culture of participation, of civic engagement’ (YR) and ‘some guarantee that by getting involved something will actually change’ (DN). Several interviewees observed that with the Great Debate the *banlieue* reinforced its status of ‘lost land of the Republic’ (ON), meaning a territory where the official rule of order is almost absent and where ‘urban anomy prevails’ (Perrineau 1988, 23). One respondent claims that the debate ‘gathered mainstream Frenchmen, or, to say it abruptly: downtown white Christian Europeans, and almost no people of other origins’ (MA). The Debate was seen as an exclusivist circle that leaves out the ethnic minorities ‘because they really don’t care’ (AA) or because ‘they didn’t want to hit the anthill’ (WB). The focus group respondents agreed about the insufficient diversity in the Great Debate, characterized by ‘no intention to integrate in the debates the voice of the many Frenchmen living in the banlieue, working hard and paying taxes like all the others’ (LM).

However, the focus group participants disagreed on two issues. The first was the involvement of some of the Maghreb and African *banlieue* elites in the Great Debate, especially local officials or community leaders. On the one hand, some respondents considered this an ‘act of betrayal’ that transformed these local elites into Macron’s slaves (AA). On the other hand, other respondents saw this as a ‘salutary gesture meant to give us a voice in spite of the circumstances’ (AK). Nevertheless, the latter approach was not an incentive for the ordinary citizens in the *banlieues* to get involved.

The second issue was the perceived limited inclusiveness of the Great Debates. There was a difference between the participants of French and other European origins, on the one hand, and participants of Northern African and Sub-Saharan African origin, on the other hand. The former claimed that they felt excluded from the Great Debate because of their marginalized social and economic status, even if they were white and European. For example, ‘we did not feel included rather because we were from the poor and risky banlieue than because of any other reason. [...] I don’t think we should racialize this problem, we are all evenly marginalized’ (JPH). The latter group believed that ‘stigmatization is always related to skin color’ (ON) and the *banlieue* is always associated with ‘a population of migrants coming from the South, with all their difficulties and concerns [...] who are not really welcome and whose demands the elites do their best to ignore’ (MA).

The focus group discussions focused on the need to include representatives of ethnocultural and religious communities in the Great Debate. On this matter, there was a

division between the participants who were in favor of a communitarian political representation and those underlying the need to ‘avoid communitarianism’ and to ‘strengthen the civic feelings of the people’ (DS). For some of the participants who openly claimed a Muslim identity, the Great Debate was ‘intentionally formatted to avoid a real discussion about the importance of religious beliefs in day-to-day life’ (MA), although there is an ‘obvious need to admit the role of the imams, the role of the teachings of the Quran in holding us harmoniously together’ (LM).

Another division that could be observed during the focus group discussion was between those who argue in favor or against the existence of discrimination in this deliberative process. One side is represented by those who claim experiences of ethnic and cultural discrimination and blame the ‘system’ as a whole for its ‘racist’ attitudes. The other camp consists of those who believe that the politicians’ lack of interest to encourage the participation of the *banlieue* people in deliberation and decision-making processes – including the Great Debate – is driven by selfish interests. In other words, they see politicians as motivated by their will to keep away a series of societal problems, which are above all of social and economic nature and only secondarily related to the origin of the *banlieue* inhabitants.

No place for their demands

Most interviewees and focus group respondents considered that there was no place for their demands in the Great Debate. The latter was, according to them, interested in addressing the concerns raised by the Yellow Vests protesters. The mismatch between the *banlieue*’s demands and the Great Debate’s priorities does not stop here. Several focus group respondents noticed an incompatibility between the organizers, those who were supposed to take part in the deliberations, and those who were supposed to be represented by the actual participants. One interviewee summarized the situation: ‘The government of the rich condescendingly invited the middle class to debate about the problems of the poor, who were not there and that they knew almost nothing about’ (BD). The exclusion of certain social categories leads to broad ignorance of their demands.

The respondents discussed extensively about the nature of the demands made by the Yellow Vests movement and how the Great Debate could respond to those demands. For some respondents, the Yellow Vests articulated the claims of the ‘other forgotten France. [...], the France of the countryside, of the small former industrial towns, the France of the fishermen and of the craftsmen, that France that uses old fuel consuming cars and praises traditional family Sunday lunches’ (YR). For them, albeit legitimate, the demands of ‘that France’ do not coincide with the demands of the *banlieue*, which ‘faces other and more severe challenges’ (AK), such as cleaner and cheaper housing, more secure neighborhoods, better public transportation, more and culturally diverse schoolteachers, new and better hospitals and public investments in the local and regional economy to restore the employment rate. For some respondents, the demands of the Yellow Vests movement were too soft and disconnected from the demands of the *banlieue*. The response of the government was to organize the Great Debate to ‘partially discuss some of the problems raised by the Yellow Vests and to simulate a wide public debate [...] not giving a damn about the other serious problems of this country’ (TP).

Other participants explained that the demands of the Yellow Vests and those of the *banlieue* should have been ‘combined in a common platform with more chances to succeed’ (DN). Such a convergence would have been necessary especially as several respondents believed that the demands of the *banlieue* have never been politically

articulated as such: ‘Everybody is talking about our well-known and too-much-debated problems, but there was no street movement of the banlieue with a range of clearly expressed demands’ (WB). This is due ‘[...] not to the lack of demands. On a contrary, we’ve got plenty. But to the precise intention of the government to break us in rival factions, to prevent us to be present as one voice who asks what we are actually entitled to’ (AA). Thus, the feeling of being ignored by the Great Debate and the lack of incentives to take part in it was reinforced by the idea that their demands were not acknowledged by the organizers.

Problematic format and content

The format of the Great Debate is identified by many respondents in the *banlieues* as a major obstacle for involvement. The complex procedures of the Great Debate, with tens of thousands of e-mails, hashtags, meetings, propositions, debates and chats did not appear appealing to the people in the *banlieues*. To them, ‘It was not that I couldn’t have sent an email to a Great Debate convener or irrupt into a mini-discussion organized at the City Hall. But it wouldn’t have made any change whatsoever’ (MA). Other participants complained about the top-down approach of the event and the fact that there was no voice for the ‘real’ and ‘visible’ minorities. Some respondents complained about how different local or regional debates were organized: ‘In three cities I know, there was the mayor or another public official who pre-selected the topics and who led the discussions [...] thus avoiding to give the floor to those who were potentially able to raise sensitive issues, such as, for instance, police violence and discriminations’ (AK).

Some of our respondents linked the format with the above-mentioned issue of inclusiveness. To them, the Great Debate should have approached the sensitive role of religion in the organization of the Muslim *banlieue* communities. More precisely, it ‘should have proposed solutions such as granting public subsidies to build mosques, empowering community leaders (imams or mosque councilors) to represent their groups in the relations with the state’ (SK). At the same time, there were also respondents who pointed that the debate’s problematic format and inadequate procedures were not related to the non-inclusion of some prominent Islamic leaders who ‘would have twisted even more the sense of the discussions’ by ‘deviating them toward irrelevant confessional aspects’ (JPH). To the latter category of respondents, the entire format did not allow people of any social or ethnic background to have a voice: ‘those who thought they could have a word to say in the Great Debate, French of pure extract or immigrants, Muslims, Catholics or Agnostics, Blacks or Whites, straight or gay, were simply naïve’ (YR).

Most participants expressed their doubts about the neutrality of the conveners and insisted that the proceedings were anything but spontaneous. Even if the content of the Great Debate reflected on real problems, the respondents expressed doubts that this would be followed-up by the institutions: ‘even if they might have touched some relevant points, there is no indication that the government will do anything according to what came out of this debate’ (MFH). The respondents linked their previous negative experiences derived from the discussions with politicians during election campaigns to reflect their reluctance about the outcome of the Great Debate: ‘I didn’t want to get involved because I knew that ultimately they would do it the same old way – nice words, handshakes and then nothing, they will decide among themselves, according to their interests’ (JPH). This skepticism in the effectiveness in the Great Debate appears to be rooted in a general mistrust in the way decision-makers often take into account citizens’ opinions. As one respondent puts it, ‘The system is more and more capable in luring the people to take

part in elections, consultations, polls and referendums, and to pretend it implements the will of the people, while in practice such Great, Average or Small Debates are useless’ (TP).

Discussion and conclusions

This study seeks to understand the reasons for which citizens living in the Paris *banlieues* declined to participate in the Great Debate, a broad consultation and deliberation emerging in 2019 after three months of anti-government protests in France. Our findings, which draw on seven semi-structured interviews and one focus group with eight participants, add to the existing knowledge on citizens’ refusal to engage in deliberation. Table 1 summarizes the main reasons for which the respondents – with a diverse profile in terms of gender, age, profession, family origin and prior political engagement – did not participate in the Great Debate. The two columns include the general reasons for non-involvement, derived from the discussions with the 15 respondents; these correspond to the themes that we build inductively based on their answers. The second column includes the specific reflections provided by participants about the Great Debate. These are narrower than the themes and can be associated with the codes that are often used in the thematic inductive analysis. They allow a better understanding of how the participants perceived the deliberation and substantiate the reasons in the first column.

There are four main reasons for which the citizens living in the Paris *banlieues* did not involve in the Great Debate. These reasons are related exclusively to the features of this deliberative practice: re-legitimation, lack of inclusiveness, mismatch of demands, and format and outcome (Table 1). These features are logically connected and refer to the inability of the deliberation to fulfill the function of genuinely including citizens’ voices. They complement each other and most respondents indicate more than one of these reasons in their answers to the interviewees and focus group.

First, many respondents did not participate because they considered the Great Debate to be an attempt of the central authorities (president and government) to regain people’s confidence after a troubled period. It was seen as an answer to a contestation movement rather than a genuine attempt to address problems. Second, and somewhat counter-intuitive when thinking about re-legitimation, several respondents criticized the Great Debate for its poor inclusiveness in which there was limited possibility for those in the *banlieues* to participate. Inclusiveness is a fundamental feature for deliberative practices (Felicetti,

Table 1. Summary of the reasons for non-involvement in the Great Debate.

Reason	Specific reflections on the Great Debate
Re-legitimation	A response to a vast contestation movement The need of legitimization of President Macron Attempt to regain people’s confidence
Lack of inclusiveness	Disregarding the ethno-cultural diversity Over-representation of ‘French’ social categories No voice for the ordinary people in the <i>banlieues</i>
Mismatch of demands	Focused on the demands expressed by the Yellow Vests Did not reflect the demands of the <i>banlieue</i> people
Format and outcome	Top-down procedures that reduce involvement No indication that the results will be implemented The perception of pre-settled outcomes

Niemeyer, and Curato 2016) and the disregard of specific social, ethnic or cultural categories discouraged involvement. Third, related to the idea of inclusiveness, many respondents perceived the Great Debate as isolating their demands and responding only to those demands raised by the Yellow Vests protestors. The latter raised several major issues that rarely overlap with the issues characterizing the *banlieues*. Fourth, the top-down format of the deliberation, the perception of pre-settled outcomes and the lack of trust that anything discussed would have a policy follow-up dissuaded several respondents from participating.

All the respondents from the *banlieue* were quite familiar with the Great Debate, its aims, general characteristics and functioning. Their non-involvement was a conscious decision taken on the basis of good knowledge about this consultative and deliberative process. During the interviews and focus group, all respondents revealed details about the Great Debate. Their statements were often confirmed about what was available in third-party commentaries and earlier research on the topic, cited in the previous section. As such, the involvement was not the result of poor information but of a more complex reasoning in which information processing played an important part.

The reasons mentioned in Table 1 complement the existing explanations from the literature. So far, research has outlined issues related to the priority of the private sphere, the conflict-averse nature of people and the perceived inability to participate in important decisions. None of these earlier explanations were mentioned by our respondents yet they all showed interest in this public event. This contradicts the literature that overemphasizes a lack of interest in the topics covered by the deliberative practices. Instead, the interview and focus group respondents did not mention the priority of their private matters, none of them said they were too busy and there was no reference to potential conflicting schedules. Moreover, many of them were fine with public discussion and were not afraid of being judged by their peers. Related to the latter, the respondents were aware of the existence of a particular *banlieue* identity and were willing to display it in public.

Equally important, none of the respondents indicated concern about their lack of competence in deliberation or making decisions. They spoke openly about the problems that their communities face daily and often referred to potential solutions to address those issues. They appeared eager to get involved in a meaningful conversation with decision makers. Their main critique towards the Great Debate is that it did not provide the setting for such a conversation to take place. In general, most respondents were unhappy with the format and the unclear possibility for people to make their voices heard in deliberation. All these indicate that our participants from the *banlieues* refused to get involved in the deliberative practice because it did not achieve its basic functions.

At the same time, our findings enrich and nuance earlier conclusions about citizens' non-involvement. Earlier works show that lack of involvement can occur when citizens see the deliberation as elite-driven, part of a larger process of manipulation and not able to produce outcomes (Neblo et al., 2010; Jacquet 2017). The respondents from the *banlieues* acknowledged these as major problems of the Great Debate and expanded the repertoire of issues that could be raised about a deliberative process. They saw the Great Debate as an attempt of the state authorities to manipulate the public. According to them, this was intended to give the impression that politicians seek to address grievances and listen to citizens, but in reality, it aimed to regain public trust. Their opinion coincides with that of many participants to the Yellow Vests movements who contested the legitimacy of the entire process (Dobler 2019). The format was biased due to top-down procedures and impartial facilitators who took the discussion in the desired direction, toward pre-established outcomes. The non-inclusive and non-responsive

character of the Great Debate lies at the core of people in the *banlieues* to decline participation. Our respondents felt that their involvement would not make a difference because the design and goals were flawed.

These observations bear broader implications for the study of deliberation and citizens' involvement. Our study includes 15 respondents and their opinions cannot be generalized to a larger population. Nevertheless, the information provided by the interviews and focus group indicates the importance of the design of a deliberative setting. In the specific case of the Great Debate, its 'fake' intentions, poor inclusiveness, lack of responsiveness to demands and flawed functioning steered away citizens from participating. All these show that deliberations can attract citizens if they provide opportunities that can persuade citizens of the quality of the process. This conclusion is relevant for future studies that may wish to account for such reasons when seeking to explain the poor involvement of citizens. Also, it may be an important observation for organizers of deliberative events who wish to increase the engagement of citizenry.

Our analysis is limited to a relatively small number of respondents, focusing on the population in the *banlieues*. Further research can build on this approach and compare the reasons for which citizens belonging to several social or ethno-cultural groups do not engage in deliberation. For example, using the specific case of the Great Debate, it would be relevant to understand why some participants in the Yellow Vests movement did not engage in this deliberation. Another possible avenue for research is to conduct interviews with those who did not participate in the alternative proposed by the Yellow Vests (the Real Debate, le Vrai Débat) to see whether non-involvement was triggered by similar determinants. Such a comparison can indicate differences in the perception of the two deliberations but also the effect produced by their design on people's willingness to get involved.

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Appendix 1: The interviewees' profiles.

Gender	Initials	Age	Profession	Area of birth	Family origin	Prior political engagement
M	AK	34	Unemployed	Parisian banlieue	Tunisia, 2 nd generation	Usual voter
F	ON	44	Saleswoman	Parisian banlieue	Gabon, 2 nd generation	Occasional voter
M	JPH	51	Schoolteacher	Rural Northern France	France	Usual voter
M	SK	22	Student	Parisian banlieue	Mali, 3rd generation	Non voter
M	DN	28	Driver	Urban Francophone Belgium	Belgium, 1 st generation	Occasional voter
F	LR	67	Pensioner	Rural Eastern France	France	Usual voter
F	TP	38	Technician	Parisian banlieue	Portuguese, 2 nd generation	Usual voter

Appendix 2: The profile of focus group participants.

Gender	Initials	Age	Profession	Area of birth	Family origin	Prior political engagement
M	WB	45	Waiter	RD Congo	RD Congo, 1st generation	Occasional voter
F	DS	42	Accountant	Parisian banlieue	France	Usual voter
M	AA	24	Student	Urban Southern France	Cameroun, 2nd generation	First time voter
F	MFH	39	Au-pair	Urban Eastern France	France	Non voter
M	BD	29	Unemployed	Paris	Italy, 3rd generation	Occasional voter
M	YR	52	Clerk	Rural Central France	France	Usual voter
M	MA	53	Worker	Parisian banlieue	Algeria, 1 st generation	Occasional voter
F	LM	19	Student	Parisian banlieue	Morocco, 3rd generation	Non voter

Appendix 3: The procedures and questionnaire used for semi-structured interviews.

Average length of interviews: 40 min.

Locations: Argenteuil, Saint-Denis

Period: late February-early March 2019

Interviewees: 7

Main questions are numbered, follow-up questions are marked with letters

Introduction by the researcher: explaining the purposes of the research, the conditions of anonymity, other relevant details, and getting written informed consent for participation.

1. Please briefly introduce yourself. We are interested to find out some relevant information about your origin, background and education, and about your current occupation.
2. Do you think of yourself as an inhabitant of the *banlieue*?
 - (a) What does it mean for you to be one?
3. What is your general opinion about the current social and political situation in France?
4. What do you generally think of President Macron's initiative usually known as the Great Debate?
 - (a) How much do you know about it?
5. Could you briefly explain to us what were the main reasons for not taking part in the Great Debate?
6. In your opinion, why did the government organize the Great Debate?
7. What do think about the people who participate in the Great Debate?
 - (a) Do you have an idea about those who took part into it?
8. What about the topics discussed during the Great Debate, as far as you know?
 - (a) How did you find them in connection with your assessment about the French society's main challenges?
9. What could be expected as a result of the Great Debate?
 - (a) Although you did not participate, please try to weigh the outcomes of the debate.
 - (b) What's next?

Appendix 4: The procedures and questionnaire used for the focus group

Duration: 125 min

Place: Noisy-le-Grand

Time: early March 2019

Participants: 8

Introduction by the researcher: explaining the purposes of the research, the conditions of anonymity, other relevant details, and getting the informed consent for participation.

1. Please briefly introduce yourselves.
2. How would you define the *banlieue*? What are its specificities? Do you think there is a feeling of belonging among its inhabitants?

The researcher picked two randomly chosen persons to answer, besides the two who answered spontaneously.
3. What is your general opinion about the current social and political situation in France?

The researcher designated two other randomly chosen persons to answer, before allowing the three participants who already wanted to express their thoughts.
4. What do you generally think about the President Macron's Great Debate initiative?

The researcher allowed the four persons who wanted to express opinions to do so, followed by a short contradictory debate between two participants
5. Why didn't you participate to the Great Debate?

The researcher made a full tour of the table. After gathering a series of almost constant answers, he approaches the issues presented as reasons for the non-participation in the next questions.

6. What did the President expect from the people so as he decided to organize the Great Debate? To what extent did this prevent you from participating in it?

The researcher allowed the three persons who wanted to express opinions to do so and asked two other participants to share their views on the matter.

7. How would you assess the Great Debate in terms of the categories of citizens who took part into it?

The researcher allowed the four persons who wanted to express opinions to do so and allowed a short contradictory debate between three participants.

8. What about the topics discussed during the Great Debate, as far as you know? How did you find them in connection with your assessment about the French society's main challenges?

The researcher allowed the six persons who wanted to express opinions to do so and indulged and reoriented several debates among different participants revolving around the topic of this question.

9. What could be expected as a result of the Great Debate? Although you did not participate, please try to weigh the outcomes of the debate. What's next?

The researcher allowed the five persons who wanted to express opinions to do so and encouraged spontaneous complementary interventions until the exhaustion of the topic.