

## **New Horizons in European Studies**

**Aston University, 24-25 April 2014**

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# Furthering Deliberative Democracy? The Role of Environmental Groups in EU Climate Change Policy-Making

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Paper prepared for the 2014 UACES Student Forum Conference  
Aston University, Birmingham, UK

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## **Abstract**

In seeking to lead the world on climate change and address its democratic deficit, the European Union (EU) has turned to civil society organizations (CSOs), including environmental groups, to increase the legitimacy and quality of its policy decisions. Drawing on the theoretical lens of civil society in a deliberative democratic framework, the current paper analyzes to what extent environmental groups contribute to climate policy debates at EU level. Using data from key informant interviews and media analysis, this paper investigates environmental group engagement in three key deliberative spaces against four normative criteria derived from deliberative democratic theory. Overall, results suggest that environmental groups increase the quality and rigor of EU climate policy debates. However, a number of factors, such as the elite nature of EU climate policy deliberation, limit this contribution. Further research could address other spaces of deliberation and the deliberative nature of the EU as a whole.

## **1. Introduction**

The European Union currently faces the dual challenges to lead international action on climate change (Jordan, Huitema, Van Asselt, Rayner, & Berkhout, 2010), and addressing its ‘democratic deficit’ (Lord, 1998). This paper analyzes to what extent environmental groups, which play increasingly important roles in EU climate change policy-making (Schreurs & Tiberghien, 2007, p. 30; see also Giddens, 2011), contribute to the quality and rigor of climate policy debates at EU level.

While environmental groups frequently interact with the EU, their role in EU climate policy-making remains under-researched. In particular, relevant literatures fall short of applying systematic theoretical approaches to environmental groups (studies with mostly descriptive approaches include Gullberg, 2011; Maxian Rusche, 2010; Michaelowa, 1998; Schreurs & Tiberghien, 2007; Wurzel & Connelly, 2011). The current paper seeks to address this gap by asking to what extent environmental groups make positive contributions to address the challenges of climate policy-making and democratic legitimacy in the EU.

### **1.1 Overview of the current paper**

Drawing on the theoretical lens of civil society in a deliberative democratic framework, this paper seeks to expand our knowledge on environmental group contribution to the emergence and quality of EU climate policy debates. This is done with a focus on three key informal spaces of deliberation, namely how environmental groups deliberate internally, with other groups and in public (see Christiansen & Piattoni, 2004). The paper continues as follows: the introduction reviews key literatures on deliberative democracy and environmental groups in the EU. After explaining my methodology, I

present results, which show that while environmental groups contribute significantly to climate policy deliberation in the EU, their contribution differs across deliberative spaces. I conclude that environmental group activities ameliorate the EU's democratic deficit regarding some, but not all aspects of deliberative democratic theory.

## **1.2 The EU's dual challenges: climate policy and democratic legitimacy**

In order to lead the world on climate change, the EU finds itself under constant pressure to make effective policy at home. At various historical points, the EU has found its approach wanting and needed to make substantial policy proposals (Jordan et al., 2010). Involving 'stakeholders' in this process has become increasingly important in recent decades. Under pressure to deliver on Kyoto targets, the EU created two European Climate Change Programs (ECCP) between 2000 and 2003 in order to involve environmental groups and business in policy development (Maxian Rusche, 2010; Van den Hove, 2000). Since then, environmental groups have played increasingly important roles in EU climate change policy-making, so that some groups have gained 'advisory status' with the European institutions (Schreurs & Tiberghien, 2007).

This drive to involve stakeholders also originated from the legitimacy crisis following the fall of the Santer Commission in 1999, which ultimately precipitated the 2001 White Paper on Governance (European Commission, 2001). However, this new 'governance' approach, raises challenging questions about democratic legitimacy (Pollack, 2010). This is because a "decentering of political authority [...], a shift of authority away from the state" complicates the question of citizen participation and democratic legitimacy (Bridge & Perreault, 2009, p. 481). Related concerns find

expression in ongoing debates about the EU's 'democratic deficit' (Lord, 1998, p. 11; for skeptical views, see Majone, 1996; Moravcsik, 2002). For the sake of the current argument, I draw on sociological explanations (Chryssochoou, 2010), which hold that the democratic deficit arises from a perceived

[...] gap between the powers of European institutions and the ability of European citizens to influence their work and decisions. (McCormick, 2011, p. 104; see also Corbett, 2012)

Theorists have long argued that civil society organizations<sup>1</sup> (CSOs) may strengthen the link between citizens and governmental institutions by introducing participatory and representative elements (McCormick, 2011). However, EU CSOs generally struggle to bring the EU institutions closer to its citizens (Kohler-Koch & Quittkat, 2013; Saurugger, 2008; Warleigh, 2001; Warleigh & Fairbrass, 2002) and to fulfill other representative functions (Corbett, 2012; Kohler-Koch, 2010).

While these approaches have highlighted the various shortcomings of EU civil society activities, they cannot elucidate the full range of democratic contributions of environmental groups. I thus use on deliberative democratic approach to analyze the role of civil society in the democratization of EU governance (see Eriksen, 2000; 2009).

### **1.3 Deliberative democracy – a new answer to the democratic deficit?**

Deliberative democratic theory rose to prominence as a way of addressing democratic legitimacy (Dryzek & Niemeyer, 2010). Deliberative democratic theorists consider processes of political deliberation as central for the generation of democratic legitimacy (Dryzek, 2000; Habermas, 1996; Held, 2006; Manin, 1987). Here, I follow Chambers (2003), who defines deliberation as

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<sup>1</sup> All organizations under study here are considered civil society organizations for the purpose of this study.

“[...] debate and discussion aimed at producing reasonable, well-informed opinions in which participants are willing to revise preferences in light of discussion, new information, and claims made by fellow participants” (p. 309).

Democratic systems and decisions are considered legitimate to the extent that they are constituted around or arise through deliberation. Thus, if environmental groups contribute to political deliberation at EU level, they can be said to help address the democratic deficit.

### *1.3.1 Deliberation in practice*

Two key assumptions underpin the idea of deliberative democracy: first, that people are willing and able to re-consider their political preferences through processes of deliberation (Habermas, 1996; Held, 2006) and second, that ‘substantially and formally equal individuals’ participate in a free, reasoned and otherwise unconstrained debate (Cohen, 1989). This requires ‘reciprocity’—namely that participants are willing to accept each other’s reasons—as well as publicity of the debate so that everybody can participate (Gutmann & Thompson, 1996).

A number of scholars have attempted to design deliberative spaces that provide the necessary conditions for deliberation (Dryzek & Niemeyer, 2010). Relevant approaches include ‘mini-publics’ (Fung, 2003), ‘consensus conferences’ (Joss & Durant, 1995), ‘deliberative polls’ (Fishkin, 1991) and ‘deliberative assemblies’ (Dryzek, Bächtiger, & Milewicz, 2011). By and large, these experiments highlight the challenge to make deliberation work in practice (Carpini, Cook, & Jacobs, 2004; Ryfe, 2005).

This state of affairs makes it difficult to apply insights from democratic experiments to larger political systems where the great number of people involved

precludes face-to-face deliberation. Proposed solutions include restricting deliberation to elected or randomly chosen individuals; limiting the occasions of deliberation to constitution-building or conceptualizing deliberation as competing public discourses (Dryzek, 1990; Dryzek & Niemeyer, 2010). However, each ‘solution’ creates new theoretical and practical issues, not least in the EU, where it is questionable whether a ‘public sphere’ exists (de Beus, 2010; Dryzek & Niemeyer, 2010). Related concerns have inspired some scholars to relax the strict deliberative criteria of confined experiments without doing away with the overall approach by considering deliberative systems.

### *1.3.2 Deliberative systems*

Jane Mansbridge and colleagues define a deliberative system as

[...] one that encompasses a talk-based approach to political conflict and problem-solving – through arguing, demonstrating, expressing, and persuading. (Mansbridge et al., 2012, p. 5)

Conceptualizing deliberative systems requires relaxing strict deliberative criteria, meaning that not all parts of the system have to be internally deliberative, as long as they add up to creating an overall deliberative system (Parkinson, 2012). Consequently not every communication in a deliberative system has to satisfy the idealized conditions reviewed above (Mansbridge et al., 2012).

However, scholars have typically sought to distinguish deliberation from other forms of communication such as rhetoric (see Chambers, 2003). As a solution, Mansbridge (1999) proposes that the deliberative system may contain a great deal of communication, ranging from ‘everyday talk’ among individuals to idealized deliberation (see also Baber & Bartlett, 2005). But not everything goes: the deliberative system only

includes communication which addresses issues of ‘common concern’<sup>2</sup> and which have some practical relevance (Mansbridge, 1999; Mansbridge et al., 2012).

Even though standards have been softened in the deliberative systems approach, it is still important to have clear yardsticks against which to judge communication. Based on the above review and drawing on Dryzek (2009) and Tanasescu (2009), I use the following four deliberative criteria in the current project, but recognize that not all criteria may be satisfied or applicable in every situation: (1) openness and equal participation; (2) argumentative communication; (3) transparency and publicity; and (4) the binding nature of decisions. I use these criteria to evaluate a range of political communication on climate change in which environmental groups participate across multiple spaces of deliberation.

### *1.3.3 Deliberative spaces*

Whereas Jürgen Habermas asserted that deliberation should be confined to the formal political system, others argue that deliberation can also take place in other spaces (Dryzek, 2009; Dryzek & Niemeyer, 2010; Gutmann & Thompson, 2004; Mansbridge, 1999; Elstub, 2010; Hendriks, 2006). Here, I follow scholars who argue that deliberation may also happen in non-public spaces. For example, Parkinson (2006) studied the deliberative nature of health policy-making in the United Kingdom and considered public, as well as more restricted arenas. For CSOs, it follows that “a full understanding of deliberation must include negotiation both among and within interest groups” (Mansbridge, 1992, p. 42), some or even most of which may not be public.

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<sup>2</sup> What is of ‘common concern’ or ‘political’ is of course contested. Deliberative democrats suggest that societies should decide what is political and what is not through deliberative procedures (e.g., Mansbridge, 1999).

### *1.3.4 How CSOs deliberate*

Civil society organizations deliberate in two ways: through internal deliberation or externally when engaging with other organizations, official governance structures or in the public sphere (Warren, 2001; 2011). How much CSOs deliberate internally depends both on organizational structures, as well as on the practices that emerge within—or sometimes against—these structures. Organizations deliberate internally in order to resolve conflict, which is often necessary to spark deliberative processes into life (Mansbridge, 1999; Warren, 2001). However, too much conflict may lead to organizational disintegration. Medium levels of conflict may thus be conducive to deliberation (see Lowe & Goyder, 1983).

The second contribution to deliberation comes from CSO engagement in the public sphere (Habermas, 1996). In this context, civil society may develop and lead discourses that in turn influence decision-making institutions (Dryzek, 2000). Given that some CSOs have hierarchical internal structures (Calhoun, 2011; Smismans, 2006) their principal democratic contribution may result from engagement in the public sphere.

### *1.3.5 Deliberative approaches to EU CSOs*

There are few studies that draw on deliberative approaches to evaluate the role of CSOs in the EU. While deliberative approaches have been popular in other areas of EU studies (Neyer, 2006), for example to study EU democratization (Eriksen & Fossum, 2007), or evaluate comitology (Pollack, 2003), the EESC (Smismans, 2002), or the open method of coordination (De la Porte & Nanz, 2004; Radulova, 2007), EU civil society has yet to be evaluated systematically in a deliberative democratic framework. This is not

for an overall lack of research on EU civil society; to date, other theories have simply been more prevalent (Tanasescu, 2009), creating an important gap in empirical literatures (Hüller, 2010; Smismans, 2006; Tanasescu, 2009).

A rare example of using deliberative approaches to study EU civil society is Tanasescu's (2009) book-length work on stakeholder participation in EU consultation activities. She concludes that stakeholder participation generates multiple deliberative aspects, but none of them fulfills all deliberative criteria. To date, there is no work on the deliberative contribution of environmental groups in the EU.

#### *1.4 Environmental groups in the EU*

Most environmental groups started engaging with the EU in the 1990s (Adelle & Anderson, 2013). For climate change policy, the most relevant groups are the Climate Action Network-Europe CAN-E, Friends of the Earth Europe (FoEE), Greenpeace and the World Wide Fund for Nature's European Policy Office (WWF-EPO), with the European Environmental Bureau (EEB), Health and Environment Alliance (HEAL), Friends of Nature International (NFI), Transport and Environment (T&E), the Central and Eastern Europe Bankwatch Network (CEE)—which together form the Green-10 group of environmental organizations (Greenwood, 2011)<sup>3</sup>—and other organizations such as Belona or E3G, playing more peripheral roles (Wurzel & Connelly, 2011, p. 219; see also Geden & Fischer, 2008).

Environmental groups active on climate policy in Brussels fall into two categories: federated networks of national organizations such as CAN-E, or offices of international environmental groups, such as Greenpeace (Adelle & Anderson, 2013).

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.green10.org/>

Among the former, ‘open networks’ do not limit the number of their members, whereas ‘closed networks’, such as BirdLife, only admit one member organization per country (Roose, 2003). Formally, networks tend to have democratic structures (Hontelez, 2012). Insider accounts suggest that working groups form the backbone of everyday policy-making in networks such as the EEB (Hontelez, 2012; see also Roose, 2003). This means that there are good opportunities for member group participation (Lowe & Goyder, 1983). However, language issues and different policy needs challenge the continuous engagement of member groups from the EU member states (Heinelt & Meinke-Brandmeier, 2006; Hontelez, 2012). Because networks do not admit individuals, and because they have professionalized over time, they struggle to engage citizens in EU governance (Greenwood, 2003; Saurugger, 2006; Warleigh, 2001).

Overall, environmental groups in Brussels collaborate closely (Mazey & Richardson, 2005; Zito & Jacobs, 2009), including in the climate sector (Wurzel & Connelly, 2011). What stands out about everyday activities of environmental groups in the climate sector is the small number of people involved (Wurzel & Connelly, 2011). Given the small size of the sector, environmental groups specialize in few areas (Michaelowa, 1998; Zito & Jacobs, 2009). This also means that these groups do not have sufficient expertise to input on some issues (Hallstrom, 2004; Michaelowa, 1998; Zito & Jacobs, 2009).

The fact that environmental groups active at EU level engage in limited public campaigning necessitates their leading in framing debates, and providing rational arguments to policy-makers in long-term deliberative and trust-based interactions (Mazey & Richardson, 2005), including in the climate sector (Wurzel & Connelly, 2011). In

general, environmental groups report reasonable access to European decision-makers, (Gullberg, 2011; Heins, 2005). However, it has long been recognized that different groups use different strategies—for example, Friends of the Earth is often more confrontational than more traditional conservation organizations (Lowe & Goyder, 1983). At the EU level, environmental groups typically engage in less confrontational, more consultative and often informal activities (Hontelez, 2012; Roose, 2003). Engaging the public typically complements traditional lobbying strategies, particularly in order to counterbalance other powerful actors (Lowe & Goyder, 1983) by influencing public opinion (Wurzel & Connelly, 2011).

Overall, the influence of environmental groups in Brussels remains hard to measure, because there are many different ways in which influence could happen, and because it is impossible to study the counterfactual of no interest groups (Adelle & Anderson, 2013). There is a long-standing suspicion that business lobbies are more powerful than general interest groups (Greenwood, 2011; Michaelowa, 1998), although some environmental groups, such as Greenpeace, draw on considerable and powerful international networks (Zito & Jacobs, 2009).

In sum, this brief review suggests that environmental groups may contribute to the EU's deliberative democratic system in a number of ways. These include internal, inter-group and public deliberations. However, current literatures have little to say on the extent and quality of deliberation in the various arenas discussed above. The current paper thus seeks to evaluate the arenas that have received less attention so far: informal, day-to-day deliberation when environmental groups deliberate internally and when they interact with other groups, with the European institutions, and in the public sphere.

## 2. Methods

### 2.1 Semi-structured interviews

The predominant approach of this study consists of semi-structured key informant interviews with forty-three individuals (some requested to remain anonymous). I used several criteria to identify potential interviewees including identifying staff members responsible for climate policy in the environmental groups belonging to the Green-10 group.<sup>4</sup> In addition, I relied on a mixture of personal contacts, networks I built in Brussels, and the EC<sup>5</sup> and EP<sup>6</sup> publically available online directories to identify additional interviewees at all major EU institutions and other organizations working on climate change policy.

### 2.2 Media analysis

In the second part of the study, I considered environmental group presence in the *European Voice* newspaper articles. *European Voice* is one of the few pan-European newspapers with a circulation of 19,000 print copies and about 150,000 monthly visits online.<sup>7</sup>

#### 2.2.1 Article retrieval and coding

In a first step, I conducted a keyword search in the *European Voice* archives in order to retrieve articles in which environmental groups are quoted or mentioned between

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<sup>4</sup> Two organizations, namely the CEE Bankwatch Network and the European Environment Bureau (EEB) did not have staff members dedicated to climate change in autumn 2012 when this research was conducted and were thus excluded from original contacting.

<sup>5</sup> [http://ec.europa.eu/staffdir/plsql/gsys\\_page.display\\_index?pLang=EN](http://ec.europa.eu/staffdir/plsql/gsys_page.display_index?pLang=EN)

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/meps/en/full-list.html>

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.europeanvoice.com/GED/00000000/3200/3225.pdf>

January 1 2007 and December 31 2012<sup>8</sup> and which contain the keywords ‘climate change’ or ‘global warming’. This search returned 194 articles. From this population, I drew a random stratified sample of 54 articles, weighted by overall group participation and year. Second, I identified where groups were mentioned, quoted or cited in these articles and coded this information (relevant paragraph or section) using the discourse quality index, which can be used to measure the discursive quality of a text (Steenbergen, Bächtiger, Spörndli, & Steiner, 2003). I modified the index slightly according to recommendations by Nanz and Steffek (2005). At this stage, only criteria for justification were applied given that the other categories proved inapplicable for the short quotes or citations in articles. This is because groups were not able to fully develop their arguments in these articles, which were authored by journalists.

In addition, I coded fourteen articles written by staff members of environmental groups. Given that self-authoring allowed them to develop their arguments more fully, I used the full set of criteria developed by Steenbergen and colleagues (2003), but dropped the participation criterion, which was created for speeches. I also maintained Nanz and Steffek’s (2005) suggestions on simplifying coding of justification. I subsequently calculated averages for each score and overall scores for each article.

### **3. Results**

This results section analyzes environmental group contribution to (1) openness and equal participation; (2) argumentative communication; (3) transparency and publicity; and (4) the binding nature of decisions in climate policy debates. This is done

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<sup>8</sup> Organizations included were: BirdLife; CAN-Europe; EEB; NFI; FOEE; Greenpeace; HEAL; Oxfam; T&E; WWF-EPO

by considering (1) intra-organizational deliberation; (2) inter-organizational deliberation; and (3) public deliberation. Overall, environmental groups active in Brussels contribute significantly to the quality and quantity of EU climate policy deliberation, but a strong Brussels focus and little membership engagement limit this contribution.

### 3.1 Environmental organizations included in this study

Eleven organizations active in the EU climate policy area and with a permanent presence in Brussels were included in this study. See Table 1 for an overview of key governance characteristics of each organization.<sup>9</sup>

Table 1: Summary of environmental groups studied and lobbying on climate change policy in Brussels

| <b>Name</b>            | <b>Staff in Brussels</b>          | <b>General governance characteristics</b>  |
|------------------------|-----------------------------------|--|
| BirdLife International | 5                                 | International partnership; partners decide on strategies and elect a council every four years; one ‘partner’ organization per country; executive governed; coordination, support and implementation by the international secretariat, regional programs and partners; task forces. |
| CAN-E                  | 15                                | International network with over 120 members in 25 countries in Europe; association-based (general assembly twice a year); working groups.  |
| FOEE                   | 26 (4 on climate change & energy) | Network of more than 30 organizations around Europe; annual general meeting.   |
| NFI                    | 1                                 | Association of 50 member organizations; general annual assembly of presidents of member organizations.   |
| T&E                    | 16                                | Association with over 50 member organizations;   |

<sup>9</sup> Information in this table is based on interviews and organizational websites.

|  |   |  |
|--|---|--|
|  |   | annual general meeting; working groups.  |
| HEAL   | 8 (1 person on climate and energy issues) | Association of 65 member groups; general assembly; working groups.   |
| CIDSE<br>(Alliance of catholic development agencies) | 15  | Association with 17 member organizations; annual general meetings; board of directors comprised of presidents of the member organizations. |
| Greenpeace   | 16 (4 on climate and energy issues)       | Hierarchical, international environmental campaign organization.   |
| Oxfam  | 11  | Confederation of 17 organizations worldwide; hierarchical decision-making.   |
| WWF-EPO  | 35  | Hierarchical organization/ ‘franchise model’; strategy board with members of national offices.   |
| E3G  | 22 (Berlin, Brussels, London)             | Think tank; hierarchical.  |

### 3.2 Openness and equal participation in policy deliberation

In the following section, I analyze to what extent environmental groups contribute to the openness and equal participation in EU climate policy debates.

#### 3.2.1 Intra-group climate change policy deliberations

In most organizations, working groups structure internal deliberation.<sup>10</sup> However, the level of participation in working groups depends on member group resources. In network-based organizations, large member groups often have more specialized staff and thus participate in a greater number of working groups.<sup>11</sup> Although working groups,

<sup>10</sup> Lies Craeynest, Oxfam

<sup>11</sup> Nina Renshaw, T&E; Magdalena Wagner, NFI; Environmental group interview #11

assemblies, or periods for comments provide formal structures for deliberation,<sup>12</sup> many staff members report that linguistic and cultural issues often complicate equal

participation in policy debates. For example one person said that

[...] although that has improved a lot in the last 15 years now there is most people speaking English and you know, it has made life much, much easier but still, you know, when you write a document, some people speak very good English, some people don't, you need to make sure everybody understand, when you have discussions, some people, native speakers, others are at pain of expressing themselves, making sure that this remains a fair discussion, you know, requires quite a lot of work.<sup>13</sup>

Similarly, people bring their national political cultures and styles to Brussels, which matter when collaborating:

[...] there are all sort of cultural issues, Mediterraneans stand up on the table and shout, Fins sort of mumble looking down and again, it creates all sort of funny interactions and misunderstandings that you need to deal with [...]<sup>14</sup>

In consequence, equal participation in internal deliberation may not only depend on formal structures such as working groups, but also on the skill of coordinators and participants to accommodate linguistic and cultural differences.

Such cultural and linguistic challenges matter especially because many staff members from both network-based and hierarchical organizations report a great deal of informal contacts at the base of intra-organizational deliberations. As one staff member explained,

There is no formal process, it's very much dependent on the person, on the level of resources, on whether the issue is something that is interesting for national groups, so national climate laws very much are, and groups are really much on the, really on the lookout for.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Environmental group interview #8

<sup>13</sup> Environmental group interview #1

<sup>14</sup> Environmental group interview #1

<sup>15</sup> Environmental group interview #2

The same holds for hierarchical organizations, whose staff members report that informal participation prevails in everyday policy discussions:

So it's a complicated structure that revolves around a lot of internal discussion and agreement [...] we spend a lot of time talking about internally [...] Our main, our main forms is just personal contacts. I mean, we're constantly on the phone with each other, we know each other well, we have internal meetings, we have at least an annual internal meeting, but then there's also ad-hoc other meetings on issues [...]<sup>16</sup>

However, these informal discussions may also restrict the entrance of outsiders, particularly because conversations are often very Brussels-focused:

I mean of course colleagues who are in Brussels are very often more into this Brussels bubble discussion. More about procedures and less about politics, but colleagues in capitals, at the end if the government from any country's opposing our, our ideas on certain positions that we'd like to working changes we'd like to see, then at the end the procedure is less important in changing the politics and finding an argument which are convincing for the government officials.<sup>17</sup>

In consequence, 'Brussels people' often dominate the 'Brussels discussion', a phenomenon that is in part driven by different organizational needs and the challenges of communicating across different levels of governance.

### *3.2.1.1 Citizen engagement*

Citizen engagement is limited at the Brussels level, but different organizations focus on different types of engagement. Campaign organizations such as Greenpeace stress that they involve their 'supporters' in targeted campaigns, for example through letter writing to MEPs or the Commission.<sup>18</sup> For other organizations, however, members are even farther removed. As one staff member remarked,

[...] we don't have individual members as a European office. But we're different insofar as individual memberships are not something that we think about and that

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<sup>16</sup> Environmental group interview #1

<sup>17</sup> Environmental group interview #11

<sup>18</sup> Joris den Blanken, Greenpeace

also changes the character of the organization, because national organizations have to spend a lot of time promoting themselves so that members will keep donating, communicating with members whereas we only have to communicate with our offices, it's quite different in character.<sup>19</sup>

In a similar vein, another environmental group staff member remarked that “Ok, the short answer is here in Brussels, I don't speak to these people, I don't have many contacts with them.”<sup>20</sup> But the connection with national groups that do engage citizens appear very weak at best. As one person remarked,

[...] trying to engage the [national] offices is extremely difficult, because many people who would work in Greenpeace national offices, WWF national offices, would feel that European processes are far away from them, and so if they don't engage, how do we then take the next step to engage members? There are of course efforts, I know, more and more people like trying to work with blogs to try to communicate but I think it's, I don't know the numbers, but I would assume that those are fairly poorly read by non-Brussels people. I think those blogs are mostly insider things.<sup>21</sup>

Another staff member, while highlighting the fact that the member organizations should in theory feed their members' views into Brussels policy processes, cast doubt on whether this actually happens:

So that's an issue that is a question internally, because and particularly with an organization like us which has really the ambition to be a grassroots organization and bottom-up, where ideally, you know what I say in Brussels really reflects what is somehow the collective wisdom of the volunteers [...] and you know old ladies baking cakes in the local sections and so on... sometimes you wonder [...].<sup>22</sup>

In sum, there is hardly any direct deliberative citizen engagement at Brussels level and some interviewees cast doubt on whether there is a connection with citizens through multi-level organizational structures.

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<sup>19</sup> Environmental group interview #8

<sup>20</sup> Environmental group interview # 2

<sup>21</sup> Wendel Trio, CAN-Europe

<sup>22</sup> Environmental group interview #1

The issue characteristics of climate change also make citizen engagement hard. Many current EU policy debates are very technical,<sup>23</sup> and “there’s kind of a lack of trust maybe sometimes that we can solve the climate crisis.”<sup>24</sup> Citizens may not be interested in the policies discussed at EU level<sup>25</sup> and arguments and campaigns have to be very different around the EU member states, making one central EU approach difficult.<sup>26</sup> Finally, misconceptions and stereotypes about the EU lead to further disengagement.<sup>27</sup> In sum, the nature of climate change and technical and highly complex discussions, lack of perceived citizen interest in EU climate policy and insufficient organizational structures to foster policy discussion across multiple levels of governance make citizen engagement difficult.

### *3.2.2 Deliberation among groups*

Brussels-based environmental groups collaborate closely in the climate policy sector, mostly through network organizations (see previous section). Most environmental group staff members I interviewed stressed the importance of CAN-Europe for collaboration, with one person citing “[...]a bit of a community feeling [...].”<sup>28</sup> The fact that the Mundo-B Building,<sup>29</sup> which is located in walking distance from the main European institutions, serves as a home for many organizations furthermore fosters informal contacts.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Claus Mayr, NABU

<sup>24</sup> Environmental group interview # 6

<sup>25</sup> Environmental group interview #11

<sup>26</sup> Environmental group interview #11

<sup>27</sup> Nina Renshaw, T&E

<sup>28</sup> Environmental group interview #8

<sup>29</sup> <http://www.mundo-b.org/en/Objectives.html>

<sup>30</sup> Nina Renshaw, T&E

### 3.2.3 Public deliberation

Environmental groups collaborate less when addressing the public. As one staff member remarked,

[...] there is healthy competition yes [...] that could be on press matters. If I'm approaching *European Voice* trying to convince them to do a story on something [...] I'm gonna do that as [name of the organization], I'm not gonna necessarily do that with other NGOs, and if when they do their story they're quoting [name of the organization] rather than the WWF, then politically that's a good thing for us, we're not going to agree with WWF beforehand, we'll take *European Voice*, you'll take *EurActive*, no.<sup>31</sup>

Overall, interview evidence suggests environmental groups participate actively in public policy deliberations at the Brussels level. CAN-Europe's director Wendel Trio commented that

[...] we have fairly good access to some of the Brussels media, *EurActive*, *ENDS* and so on and so on, where we can indeed put things forward and where people in the European institutions in general would look at [...].<sup>32</sup>

In sum, groups participate actively in public discussions at Brussels level, but they tend to do this individually.

A case study of climate policy discussions in *European Voice* corroborates this interview evidence, showing that groups were cited or quoted frequently on climate policy issues, but usually individually. Between January 1 2007 and December 31 2012, the groups under study here (see Table 1) were mentioned or quoted in 194 articles on climate change (a bit more than 5 per month on average), representing one third of the approximately 600 articles in which these groups were quoted or cited across all topics.<sup>33</sup>

Putting aside a very small number of articles, Greenpeace, WWF, FOEE, CAN-Europe

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<sup>31</sup> Environmental group interview #2

<sup>32</sup> Wendel Trio, CAN-Europe

<sup>33</sup> Over this period, there were approximately 1900 articles containing the keywords 'climate change' or 'global warming' in *European Voice*.

and Oxfam accounted for the lion's share of quotes and mentions in articles on climate change (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Number of articles on climate change in the weekly *European Voice* where environmental groups are cited (2007-2012)

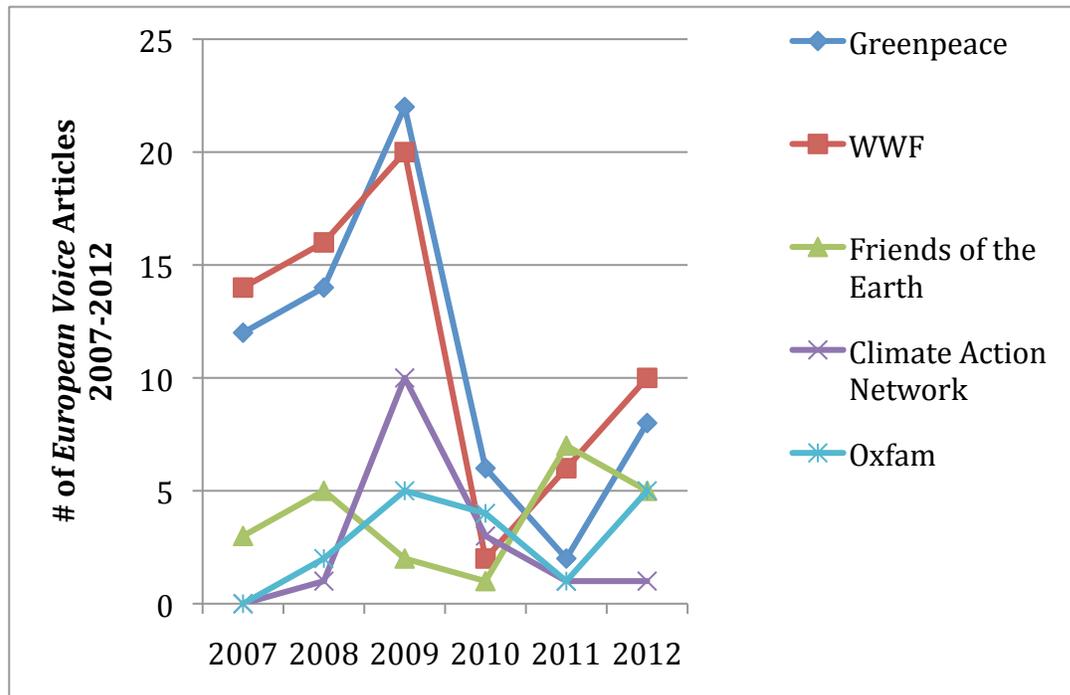


Figure 1 also shows that environmental group engagement in this medium corresponds with the EU's climate change policy cycle. The spike in articles in 2009 indicates the Copenhagen climate summit in December of that year. In sum, this case study shows that environmental groups have good access to participate in public discussions.

### 3.3 Argumentative Communication

The previous section indicates that environmental groups engage in considerable internal and inter-group discussions and communication. In this section, I consider the origins and nature of these policy discussions across the three spaces described above.

### *3.3.1 Argumentative communication in internal climate policy deliberations*

While deliberative methods appear to be the main way to solve conflicts, virtually all organizations face internal conflicts they cannot resolve through discussion. This is where the main difference lies between hierarchical and network-based organizations. The former report engaging in internal deliberations, at times aided by formal structures, which are then punctuated by executive decisions. For example, one person said that

The practical day-to-day work of the organization tends to be rather democratic, because you know, even though I'm the head of my team, I sit with them, we're working together on things, I'm not just going to order people around left right and centre, you know, cause they are also the experts in their areas. So the practical reality is that there's a lot of discussion, and there's a lot of internal discussion, [...] but then somebody takes a decision boom like that, and it's a decision, in, I guess it's more analogous not to democracy as in populous and leaders, but leaders and their own staff, right?<sup>34</sup>

This quote indicates that it is thus staff members' expertise and arguments that feed into an executive decision at a later point. However, executive decisions don't seem to happen very often. Joris den Blanken of Greenpeace said that

Well, I think most of the time, discussion is on certain details, but with some discussion, it's usually sorted out without having to fall back on any executive discussions or hierarchy.<sup>35</sup>

Overall, there was a sense that recognizing each other's arguments and finding the best possible solution characterizes internal discussions in many environmental groups under study here.<sup>36</sup> In sum, even hierarchical organizations mostly rely on discussion-based problem-solving approaches.

Network organizations have to externalize conflicts when deliberation cannot generate agreement. Organizations report three ways of doing this: not having a common

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<sup>34</sup> Environmental group interview #8

<sup>35</sup> Joris den Blanken, Greenpeace

<sup>36</sup> Lies Craeynest, Oxfam

position,<sup>37</sup> or strategic use of ambiguity through ‘flexible wording.’<sup>38</sup> It must be noted, however, that conflict externalization is restricted to a small number of substantial issues, such as nuclear power, carbon capture and storage, the 1.5 degrees target<sup>39</sup> or strategic questions.

In most other cases, deliberation and the force of the better argument suffices.<sup>40</sup> Accordingly, Wendel Trio from CAN-Europe stressed that preferences become malleable over the course of relevant discussions:

The longer the discussion takes, usually the more people will be prepared to accept something which is not necessarily fully reflecting their opinion, but which they feel as something that is an adequate reflection of the diversity of opinions.<sup>41</sup>

Many interviewees expressed faith in discussion-based problem-solving beyond the lowest common denominator, but the strength of resulting positions was viewed differently. On the one hand, Nina Renshaw (T&E) argued that

[...] in a case like that where it’s really important to get people in a room together and flesh out what we think, then we do that. We sit them down and we see, OK, what are the red lines, where can we agree. And usually we can still come to a very strong position.

On the other hand, addressing CAN-E, a policy-maker said that group deliberations generally weaken policy positions:

Well, you know, CAN, it’s grouping all of them basically, [...] when you talk to CAN you get a very balanced picture because they are probably the minimum common denominator among the NGOs and when you talk to them as a group they are let’s say, pushy, but realistic.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Environmental group interview #1

<sup>38</sup> Environmental group interview #11

<sup>39</sup> Environmental group interviews #1; 11

<sup>40</sup> Environmental group interview #2

<sup>41</sup> Wendel Trio, CAN-Europe

<sup>42</sup> EC interview #6

To sum up, across all groups, argumentative communication seems to be the primary and preferred way to resolve conflicts and reach compromise with limited externalization of conflict.

### *3.3.2 Discussions among groups*

Collaboration of independent groups necessitates discussion-based solutions. As I explained in earlier sections, CAN-Europe does most of the coordination in the climate policy sector. Resource constraints generate further pressures to collaborate and divide labor among groups. As one person said, “Well, the simple rule is that if you’re trying to do things by yourself, you’re not going very far.”<sup>43</sup> In addition, “in general, [...] on climate and energy issues, NGOs don’t normally have opposing positions, but they might have opposing views on the strategy.”<sup>44</sup> In sum, in addition to the nature of policy deliberations through CAN-Europe reviewed earlier, the overall conditions of policy advocacy in Brussels foster argumentative problem solving.

### *3.3.3 Public deliberation*

Most interviewees stressed that environmental groups contribute to the argumentative nature of climate policy-deliberations at EU level by providing key additional voices, representing “crystallized public opinion”<sup>45</sup>, “public interests”<sup>46</sup>, “the voices of our constituencies”<sup>47</sup>, the interests of their members<sup>48</sup>, vulnerable groups such

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<sup>43</sup> Environmental group interview #2

<sup>44</sup> Wendel Trio, CAN-Europe

<sup>45</sup> EC interview #4

<sup>46</sup> Environmental group interview #1

<sup>47</sup> Environmental group interview #6

<sup>48</sup> EC interview #10

as children<sup>49</sup>, or the environment as a whole as “the tree can’t speak.”<sup>50</sup> Environmental groups are also thought to contribute to technical policy areas, such as adding an “environmental voice in transport.”<sup>51</sup> According to one environmental group staff member, all of this adds up to a substantial argumentative contribution:

But certainly, I think without NGOs, I would say hardly any democratic debate would exist. [...] without NGOs we would be left only in a fight between companies [...] but I think it’s very hard to imagine that any public goods would end up being promoted purely by the competition between individual commercial interests.<sup>52</sup>

A Commission official<sup>53</sup> and two environmental group representatives<sup>54,55</sup> shared the viewpoint that environmental groups have a balancing function in the EU policy-making. In sum, there was broad consensus among interviewees from various backgrounds that environmental groups contribute to positively to debates on EU climate policy.

This argumentative contribution is also evident in *European Voice*. Using a random stratified sample of articles of the 194 *European Voice* described earlier, detailed content analysis reveals that groups contribute to the discursive quality of *European Voice* by making political demands, which they often substantiate. See Figure 2.

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<sup>49</sup> Julia Huscher, HEAL

<sup>50</sup> Magdalena Wagner, NFI

<sup>51</sup> Nina Renshaw, T&E

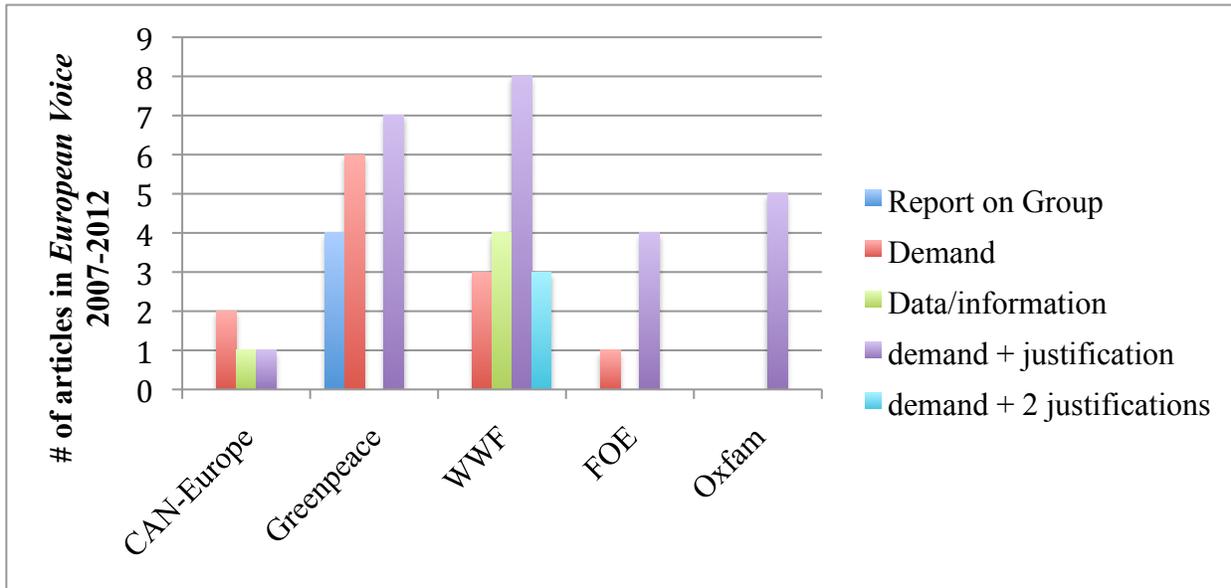
<sup>52</sup> Environmental group interview #1

<sup>53</sup> EC interview #4

<sup>54</sup> Julia Huscher, HEAL

<sup>55</sup> Magdalena Wagner, NFI

Figure 2: Environmental group discursive contribution: content analysis of *European Voice* articles



As seen in Figure 2, at the least discursive end, groups are mentioned for political actions, which can be understood as expressions of political demands. Greenpeace was most frequently quoted for political demands without justification. At the third level (data/information), the WWF and to a lesser extent CAN-E were the only groups cited as sources of data or authoritative opinion. For instance, the WWF was quoted on 20 October 2008 for having published a report on greenhouse gas emissions.<sup>56</sup> All organizations featured most prominently when quoted with demands and at least one justification, which in the vast majority of cases was pragmatic (see purple bars in Figure 2). In contrast, environmental groups were cited much less with arguments encompassing political demands, as well as pragmatic and value-based justifications (see Steenbergen et al., 2003). In sum, data from *European Voice* articles show that groups contribute

<sup>56</sup> 'EU urged to cut carbon more sharply', *European Voice*, 20 October 2008

significantly to the discursive quality of that medium because they add key policy arguments and often justification for them.

In addition, analysis of articles written entirely by environmental group representatives shows that these articles scored highly on providing pragmatic and value-based justifications, with a mean score of 1.64 (min score = 0; max score = 2) across all fourteen articles. However, lower mean scores for respect for other groups (0.86; min = 0; max = 2), respect for demands of others (0.93; min = 0; max = 3) and constructive politics (0.36; min = 0; max = 2) indicate that these articles were mainly used to push for the groups' demands, rather than attempting to engage with or synthesize opponents' arguments. Adding scores on all dimensions (highest possible score = 9) reveals that among the three top scoring articles were an article by the Green-10<sup>57</sup> (score = 6) and an article on climate finance written by the heads of the EU offices of Oxfam, WWF and Greenpeace<sup>58</sup> (score = 6). It thus seems that writing together pushes groups to write articles with higher quality discourse from a deliberative perspective.

### **3.4 Transparency and publicity**

Needless to say, much of the internal and inter-organizational deliberations described earlier are not public, but as seen before groups do contribute to public discussion vis-à-vis European media. In addition to these arguments, interview evidence suggests that environmental groups also increase the amount of information available in relevant political discussions. As one environmental group staff member puts it,

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<sup>57</sup> 'A financial system can be fixed, but can a planet?', *European Voice*, 16 April 2009

<sup>58</sup> 'A way to fill the green climate fund', *European Voice*, 3 December 2012

[...] we're constantly filing freedom of information requests, you know, like every week we're saying where the hell is that information about that thing or that thing.<sup>59</sup>

In most cases, interviewees stressed that they readily share this kind of information with other groups.<sup>60</sup> Interestingly, however, environmental groups at times divide the labor of publicizing this information. As one person explained,

[...] if we find out that there is a specific issue on which, it looks like there's a problem, there's a communication of the Council or any of the players are trying to hide away some key facts from the European public, then we make sure that that information will get to the more fighting NGOs so to say and to the media.<sup>61</sup>

Groups depend on each other for this kind of information to a certain extent. As one person said,

[...] we meet regularly to share information, too. It's more like being part of the same team in the same organization, and if you don't have that then you're not going to do much [...].<sup>62</sup>

In addition to environmental group staff, a policy-maker also pointed to the key role of environmental groups in increasing transparency:

I think they contribute to democracy in the sense that they make sure that the proceedings that are still not transparent in the Council, that's how we should say it, it's like that. They make it more transparent and they make sure that the public is aware of the issues that are playing in the Council.<sup>63</sup>

As discussed in the previous sections, environmental groups add to climate policy debates in the public sphere by contributing to European media and making information available to the public.

### **3.5 The influence of deliberation**

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<sup>59</sup> Environmental group interview #8

<sup>60</sup> Environmental group interview #8; also Julia Huscher, HEAL; Environmental group interview #6

<sup>61</sup> Gyorgyi Gurban, E3G

<sup>62</sup> Environmental group interview #2

<sup>63</sup> European Council interview #1

Overall, interviews suggest that it is complicated to evaluate environmental group influence, particularly because of a changing policy environment. As CAN-Europe's director puts it,

I think at the moment our influence is fairly limited, since Copenhagen, climate change obviously has been downscaled in terms of its importance in political discussions and similarly, because of Copenhagen NGOs have kind of lost a bit of their dynamic and as I said people have gone in different strategies [...]<sup>64</sup>

Second, interviewees stressed that environmental group influence on EU climate policy depends on the specific policy area in question.<sup>65</sup> Paul Hodson, a Head of Unit in the EC's Directorate-General (DG) Energy stressed that environmental group influence was stronger than the influence of industry on biofuels policy; however, on energy efficiency, industry tends to be much more influential than environmental groups. This also translates into openness by different Commission DGs to environmental groups; whereas DG Clima and DG Environment are seen as very open to environmental groups, DG Energy and DG Enterprise are thought to be less open to environmental group input.<sup>66</sup>

Additionally environmental group influence appears to be greatest during earlier stages of decision-making, such as agenda-setting and issue-framing, and stakeholder consultations as well as later in the Parliamentary committee phase.<sup>67</sup> Two routes to influence stand out in the interviews: one is raising public awareness and influencing public opinion. For example, one Commission official highlighted that

I think they do have a great influence. [... but compared to business,] NGOs operate in a totally different way, they go as public as possible and they want to be in the press or want to be in the media, and they want to be seen as pushing.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> MEP Mathias Groote (Head of the Environment Committee) made a similar comment.

<sup>65</sup> EC interview #9

<sup>66</sup> Gyorgyi Gurban, E3G

<sup>67</sup> Paul Hodson, EC

<sup>68</sup> EC interview #6

Similarly, an official from the European Council’s secretariat said that “the strength of NGOs is the fact that they raise public awareness.”<sup>69</sup>

The second route to influence is through technical arguments or expert advice. Multiple interviewees agreed that highly technical and specific demands were more likely to impact policy-making. In one example, Nina Renshaw explained how T&E had great influence by proposing a new EU-wide sustainability tire label, and that the EC accepted T&E’s suggestions almost without amendments. Dutch Green MEP Bas Eickhout also stressed that compared to the national level, Brussels is more ‘content based’, thus increasing the effectiveness of specific proposals. This was echoed by Jos Dings, Director of T&E, who mentioned that “Good arguments still count in Brussels.”<sup>70</sup> Several policy-makers report drawing on environmental group scientific studies<sup>71</sup> such as the WWF’s 100% renewable energy by 2050 report.<sup>72</sup> Other Commission officials emphasized that they see environmental groups as allies, pushing in the same direction as the EC on EU climate policy.<sup>73</sup> However, this does not hold true in all areas; referring to energy efficiency, Paul Hodson said that in order to contribute to relevant proposals, “you have to be able to withstand technical criticisms, and NGOs can’t help you at all with that discussion.”

#### **4. Discussion**

The current paper analyzes the role of environmental groups in EU climate policy-making from a deliberative systems perspective (Mansbridge et al., 2012).

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<sup>69</sup> European Council interview #1

<sup>70</sup> Lecture held on 7 November 2012, <http://www.ies.be/ALS2012>

<sup>71</sup> EC interview #3

<sup>72</sup> [http://assets.panda.org/downloads/the\\_energy\\_report\\_lowres\\_111110.pdf](http://assets.panda.org/downloads/the_energy_report_lowres_111110.pdf)

<sup>73</sup> EC interviews #6; 10

Overall, results suggest that environmental groups increase the quality and rigor of EU climate policy debates by making them more pluralist and rational, but this contribution is limited by the elite nature of policy deliberation, high entry barriers, specific advocacy strategies and ongoing challenges to connect multiple levels of governance.

#### **4.1 Returning to the Deliberative Criteria**

This research suggests that environmental groups contribute more strongly in some areas of EU climate policy debates than in others.

##### *4.1.1 Openness and equal participation*

The contribution of environmental groups to the openness and possibilities for equal participation in EU climate policy debates is limited. They struggle to engage their members (both members groups and individual citizens) in climate policy debates. Reasons for this state of affairs include the complexity of the EU governance system, struggles to connect multiple levels of governance, the nature of the climate change issue and the fact that some networks limit their membership geographically. When environmental groups with a Brussels presence do engage citizens, it is often through classic political activism such as letter writing or petitioning, which is generally not the reciprocal argumentative communication that deliberative democrats envision. Overall, it is clear that the nature of the climate issue and membership engagement efforts by environmental groups do not satisfy the requirements for the open and equal access to policy debates.

However, what many network organizations do achieve is allowing smaller groups with lesser resources to participate on more or less equal terms in relevant policy

deliberations. Because decision-making is mostly consensual, the ‘force of the better argument’ allows even small organizations to contribute significantly. On the whole, staff members reported good access to internal policy deliberations of their organizations. Second, environmental groups contribute to the public sphere vis-à-vis *European Voice*, which increases the publicity of EU climate policy deliberations and broadens the scope of available arguments. However, this medium is mainly Brussels-based. In sum, environmental group contribution to open and equal EU climate policy debates is little to moderate.

#### *4.1.2 Argumentative communication*

Given the prevalence of consensus-based and deliberative problem-solving approaches, this research shows that environmental groups contribute significantly to the argumentative nature of EU climate policy deliberation. Building consensus requires presenting valid arguments and accepting the arguments of others. Even in hierarchical organizations staff members spend lots of time communicating with one another. But the general ‘consensus culture’ and lack of disagreement may also reduce the overall level of deliberation and need to present arguments.

The latter could mean that some arguments are simply not made in Brussels. For example, no group appears to question the EU as the right governance level to address climate change, and most groups now agree on the overall policy strategy of the EU—e.g., market-based instruments to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Arguably, pursuing highly unconventional arguments could compromise environmental groups’ access and policy influence. However, environmental groups divide the tasks of making more provocative political demands and providing technocratic arguments. Thus, lack of

conflict may in part result from using different strategies, which in turn push environmental groups to contribute in different ways to EU climate policy deliberation.

The current evidence reveals a significant environmental group contribution to the argumentative quality of *European Voice*. The fact that organizations seek to differentiate themselves when debating in public improves the quality of climate policy discourse at the European level, because groups may present a greater range of arguments and possibly their different goals and strategies in areas where conflicts are externalized within networks.

#### *4.1.3 Transparency and publicity*

Environmental groups contribute to transparency and publicity in a number of ways. While they sometimes explain European policy processes to their member organizations and in a few limited cases to citizen members they also contribute externally by providing journalists with input and by self-authoring articles.

Environmental groups also create an accountability imperative towards the European institutions by filing freedom of information requests and publicizing key aspects of policy deliberations. In sum, this research suggests that their activities add to the transparency and publicity of EU climate policy debates.

However, it must also be recognized that environmental group staff members and policy-makers put less emphasis on transparency issues in interviews than other aspects, such as the argumentative nature policy deliberations. Considering that environmental groups often build long-term and trust-based relationships with policy-makers, who in turn rely on environmental groups for information and expertise, this may restrict

environmental group ability to conduct aggressive publicity campaigns based around leaking documents and other disruptive tactics.

#### *4.1.4 The binding nature of policy deliberations*

The evidence presented here shows that environmental groups influence EU climate policy-making, but due to resource constraints, only in a limited number of policy sub-fields. On the whole, influence appears strongest when groups approach European policy-makers with arguments and information and during earlier stages of the decision-making process. This is especially because none of the Brussels offices has a direct link to citizen members or supporters who could be instrumentalized to generate political pressure.

## **4.2 Conclusion**

In their 2001 White Paper on European governance, EU policy-makers envisioned a key role for CSOs in the process of democratizing EU governance. Analyzing civil society contribution to EU democratic governance in a deliberative systems perspective provides a nuanced view of the areas where environmental groups contribute to the quality of EU policy debates. The current research suggests that environmental groups in the climate policy sector do not contribute equally on all idealized dimensions of deliberative democracy. However, while the bounded nature of this project does not allow generalizing to the overall deliberative nature of the EU governance system and other deliberative spaces, this paper suggests that environmental groups address the EU's democratic deficit by increasing the quality and quantity of climate policy debates at European level. At the same time, they struggle to extend these debates beyond Brussels

and to actively engage their members or citizens. Reverting back to the EU's exemplary function in international action on climate change, the current findings corroborate emerging work on global deliberative climate governance (Stevenson & Dryzek, 2014) to show that CSOs likely contribute to climate policy deliberation. However, this contribution may be limited by similar struggles to broaden debates beyond relatively narrow policy-making circles.

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