

**How representative are the online political forums?
Analysis of the referendum campaign on national voting rights for foreigners**

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Introduction

A common assertion is that online forums are not representative of the general public opinion but would reflect the behaviour and opinions of frustrated and extremist citizens. The objective of this paper is to empirically test this assertion by looking at the online debates about the referendum on the question of whether resident foreigners should under certain conditions (that will be specified) be allowed to vote for the national elections in Luxembourg. In order to measure the opinions emerging from the online forums, the author has gathered the comments of a selection of the most read and active campaign forums (more than 50 comments) and has coded them to determine if they are in favour or against the extension of voting right to foreigners. The representativeness of the online forums is evaluated by comparing these results with, on the one hand, the referendum outcome and, on the other hand, the data of a representative post-referendum survey that compares the opinions of people who were active in the online forum with the ones of passive users (reader but no posting) and non-users. The research topic is relevant for the three main reasons: First, online forums have an increasing influence on the political campaign dynamic and on opinion formation (i.e. in Luxembourg more than half of the population has declared to have read them during the referendum campaign). Second there is no empirical analysis that has systematically attempted to measure how representative the opinions of online forums are. Third, in reference to the deliberative systemic approach and democratisation theories, it contributes to identify which role the online forums play in the decision- and opinion-making process.

The analysis is divided in three sections: section one presents the context in which the referendum was introduced and its main outcomes; section two focuses on a literature review concerning online forums and presents our research questions. Section three discusses the findings concerning representativeness of online forums based on content analysis of a selection of web-forums. Section four presents the findings on the active and passive user of the forum based on logistic post-referendum survey. The final section discusses these results in the perspective of the deliberative systematic approach.

Referendum in Luxembourg

As announced in the first chapter of the 2013 coalition programme, a consultative referendum was held on 7 June 2015 (see Dumont & Kies 2014) as part of an ongoing constitutional reform process. The answers to this referendum's three questions were destined to inform legislators about the state of public opinion (or rather the opinion of Luxembourg nationals, as foreigners were not allowed to vote) on specific potential reforms. The full constitution revision would then be submitted to a qualified majority (two-thirds) vote in first reading by the Chamber of Deputies and finally to a second referendum, binding this time, scheduled to take place in 2017. On this occasion, citizens will only have one question to answer: for or against the new Constitution.

Initially the three-party coalition government planned to organise the consultative referendum on four questions (see Dumont & Kies 2015): the lowering of active voting age to 16 for all elections¹; the introduction of active and optional voting rights to foreigners for national elections under certain restrictive conditions²; the introduction of term limits to ministerial mandates³, but also one regarding the relations between 'church(es) and state', and more specifically whether the state should stop taking charge of wages and pensions of clergy of the

¹'Do you approve of the idea that Luxembourg people aged between sixteen and eighteen should have the right to optionally register on electoral lists in order to participate as voters in the elections to the Chamber of Deputies, the European elections, municipal elections and referendums?'

² 'Do you approve of the idea that residents without Luxembourg nationality should have the right to optionally register on electoral lists in order to participate as voters in the elections to the Chamber of Deputies, on the double condition that they have resided at least ten years in Luxembourg that they have previously participated in European or municipal elections in Luxembourg?'

³ 'Do you approve of the idea of limiting to ten years the maximum period during which someone can continuously be part of the government (cabinet)?'

recognised religious cults.⁴ This fourth question was eventually abandoned after an agreement was settled between the Luxembourgish government and the religious representatives in January 2015.

Given the proportion of foreigners residing in the country (46 percent in 2015), the campaign was very much focused on the question of the extension of voting rights of foreigners. This issue raised the greatest concerns among the voting population, Luxembourg nationals only, despite the fact that due to the double constraints of residency (10 years) and previous vote at either local or European elections, only about 35,000 (17 percent of the voting age foreign population) would have fulfilled all conditions and therefore been able to register if such an election would have occurred in 2015.⁵ In the very unlikely case of all of them deciding to register (as the reform would only give them the option of voting, contrary to Luxembourg nationals for whom voting is compulsory), foreigners would have amounted to only 14 percent of such an enlarged electorate. In the even less likely case of all foreigners satisfying the residency condition deciding to register for the 2017 local elections, and then to register as well for the national elections scheduled for 2018, this percentage would go up to a maximum of 27.6 percent. Fears regarding this specific question nevertheless materialized with the creation of the informal Internet group called Nee2015.lu, founded as early as in March by two young school teachers. The platform gained a very large visibility during the campaign and its initiators rapidly became the federators of the part of the population which was not in favour of granting voting rights to foreigners, but also more generally those who were upset by the referendum at large. The powerful trade union of the public sector (CGFP) also declared its opposition to this extension of voting rights, but was the main exception amongst representative groups of the civil society. Indeed, the ‘Integration and Integration (Minté)’ platform, which included over 20 associations amongst which the main trade unions, as well as personalities from the economic, financial and cultural sectors campaigned in favour of the Yes. Amongst political parties, a Yes-vote to all three questions was logically supported by the three coalition government ones (Democratic Party, Socialist Workers' Party and The Greens), but also by The Left.⁶ A No-vote to all questions was supported by the Alternative

⁴ “Do you approve of the idea that the State should no longer have the obligation to take charge of wages and pensions of ministers of the recognised religions?”. Notice the wording of the question. A positive vote would thus have meant that the state would be able to stop funding cult ministers.

⁵ See <http://www.statistiques.public.lu/catalogue-publications/regards/2015/PDF-07-2015.pdf>

⁶ The largest party not represented in the Chamber, the Pirate Party, campaigned for the extension of voting rights questions but against the setting of terms limits.

Democratic Reform Party and the largest political party, the CSV of former PM Juncker. The position of that party appeared somewhat weakened during the campaign as its youth section, then the archbishop, and then even the main newspaper of the country, the *Luxemburger Wort* officially took a position in favour of extending voting rights to foreigners.

Despite the consultative nature of the referendum, due to compulsory voting in Luxembourg participation was high (87 percent of registered voters turned out). The outcome was crystal clear: 81 percent voted against the lowering of voting rights age, 78 percent against the extending voting rights to foreigners and 70 percent against the limitation of ministerial mandates. The No-vote for each question reached an unexpected level overall and a majority in all 105 municipalities of the country. Several reasons contribute to this catastrophic outcome for the governing majority: First, the early, active and successful bottom-up campaign of the No-vote allowed for a high visibility in the social (especially) and traditional media of their arguments – in particular on the foreigners' voting rights issue; second, and relatedly, the official campaign was too short to properly deal with the complex issues raised by the referendum. Focus groups realized by the University of Luxembourg revealed that many citizens were confused about the questions or did not find the questions on the lowering of voting rights age and the limitation of ministerial mandates relevant (Kies, 2015). Third, the failure of the government to conduct, as promised, a participative, enthusiastic-type of campaign and the repeated gaffes and contradictory declarations of its political leaders, was detrimental for their yes campaign. Fourth, in part due to the absence of referendum culture in the country, the No-vote was also a protest vote against a government that was perceived illegitimate by a large part of the population, as it did not include the largest party of the country (the EP election had also taken this tone, see Dumont & Kies, 2015).

Literature review and research questions

The research on the deliberativeness of the web-debates has overcome the initial phase where Manichean and definitive conclusions were expressed on the democratic potential of the web-debates. The spreading of the public debates online is not anymore described as a purely positive antidote for ameliorating our democracies by, for example, increasing the direct and participative political involvement of lay citizens (Coleman & Goetz 2001; Grossman 1995; Rheingold 1993) nor is it described as a terrible political evolution that would necessarily increase the gap between the civic and non-civic citizens (Davis 2005; Norris 2001), foster

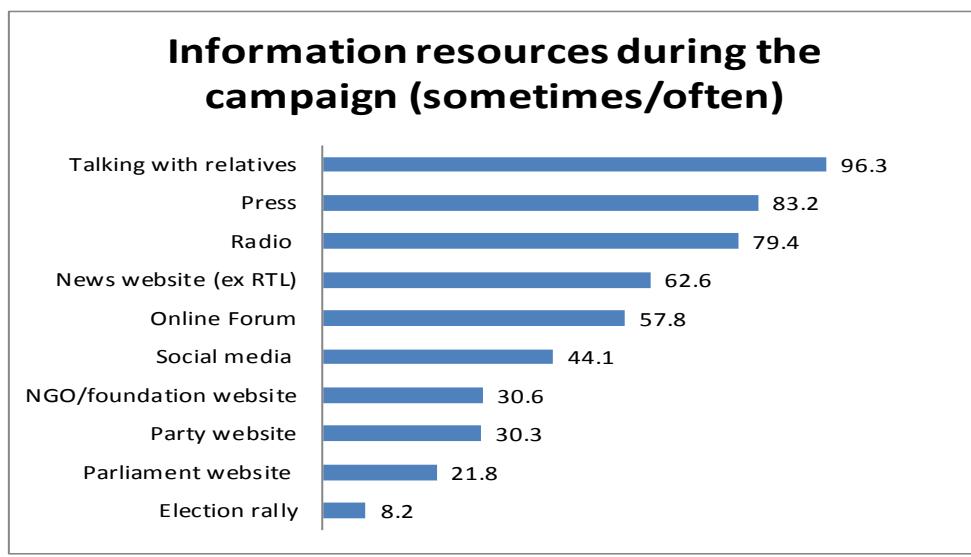
communities of like-minded people (Sunstein 2001) or promote just cheap and vulgar debates (Davis 1999).⁷ The research has now entered in a second phase where it tries to reach a more subtil and context-oriented assesment of the potential and limits of the online political debates.

To date it is possible to distinguish three broad domains of investigation concerning web-forums. The first strand of research is related to the usage of the online forum. The normative rationale is that the proliferation of web-debates is beneficial to the deliberative project if they are used by a large amount of people representing the plurality of opinions present in the society. The second field of research concerns the offer of online public debates by assessing through web-content analysis the categories of political actors hosting web-debates. From a deliberative perspective this issue is important for at least three reasons. It tells us about the willingness of the different political actors to encourage a public dialogue among their members, sympathizers and external visitors. It is indicative of the potential of online debate to influence the decision-making process. If, for example, we discover that most of the govermental agencies, legislatures a mainstream online media promote online consultations or debates, this may suggest that the *virtualisation of the public debates* contributes to increasing the impact that the users may have on opinion- and decision- making. Lastly, the analysis of the places where the web-debates are implemented is important for it influences the way the debates are conducted as well as their deliberative quality. The third strand of analysis, which corresponds to the largest research effort so far, assesses the deliberativeness of the web-debates in different contexts great variety of online debates such as political newsgroups Bentivegna 1998 (see for example Bentivegna 1998; Davis 1999Papacharissi 2004; Schneider 1997), web-forums of political parties (Desquinabó 2008; Greffet & Wojcik 2008; Kies 2008, 2010) cities or associations (Jankowsky & van Os 2002; Tanner 2001; Tsaliki 2002; Wojcik 2006; van der Merwe and Meehan 2012), web-forums hosted by mass media (Berdal 2004; Kersting 2005; Schutz 2000;), religious web-sites (el-Nawawy & Khanis, 2009), e-consultation forums (Albrecht 2003; Beirle 2002; Coleman et al. 2002; Hansard Society 2006; Monnoyer-Smith 2006; Stromer-Galley et al. 2012) as well as experimental web-forums that generally promote forms of debates that involve at the same time politicians and/or experts and ordinary citizens at the national level (Jensen 2003; Jankowsky & van

⁷ For a critical review of the way revolutionary debates influence research on web-debates see Wright (2011).

Selm 2000) and, more ambitiously, the transnational level (Badouard 2012; Kies and Wojcik 2010; Karlson 2012; Talpin and Monnoyer-Smith 2012; Kies et al. 2013; Wright 2007).

The objective of this paper is to look at forums hosted by media and to see to what extend they are presentative of the general opinion of the population. Largely ignored to date, this question appears to be particularly relevant as an growing number of people use, read and (probably) also get influenced by political online forums as voters increasingly tend to identify with opinions expressed by other lay citizens rather than opinions expressed by political parties and representatives. The data we have gathered based on a post electoral survey representative sample reveals indeed that no less than 56% of Luxembourgish voters declare to read sometimes or often online forums. Online forum as a source of electoral information ranks after discussing with relatives, press, radio, and almost at the same level of news websites. Interestingly is far more read than social media, parties websites and election rally. Even though online forums are not considered to be the main source of information, it is reasonable to suppose that they have contributed to the opinion formation process of a significant number of voters in a least three ways: by reinforcing initial opinion, by confronting initial opinions to contradictory arguments, by enriching the debates with new information which can influence undecided voters.



n: 787

As far as the active usage of forms is concerned more than one voter in 10 (11.7%) has posted (sometimes or often) a message in an online forum. It should be noted that these results should be further assessed due to the fact that two thirds of the respondents where contacted

from an online and other third through telephone and that significant differences could be observed concerning the answers to the question that are of interest for us⁸. Further research is therefore needed to estimate the validity of these results. In any case these data suggest that it is probably a mistake to continue considering the web-forum as a marginal and non-influential phenomenon. If such finding could be generalized, this would imply that any systematic approach aiming at retracing the opinion formation (with a focus on deliberation) should also take into consideration the role of online forums as one source opinion formation.

In order to evaluate the potential role of the online forum in the specific context of the referendum campaign the paper raises three exploratory questions: 1) To what extent are the opinion expressed in the online forum representative of the general public opinion? 2) Who are the active users of the forum? 3) Who are the readers of the forums?

Finding for representativeness of online forums

In order to evaluate the representativeness of the online forum we assess to what extent the opinions expressed in the forum match with the result of the referendum. To put it differently, if the online forums are representative of the general political opinion, we would expect that around 80% of the opinions expressed in the forum should be against the extension of voting right to foreigners. To measure it we have coded the message of four online forums corresponding to a total of 447 messages belonging to the two most visited news websites of the country: RTL and l'Essentiel. RTL is the most read and commented national website by the Luxembourgish speaking population, corresponding in large part to Luxembourgish citizens who have the obligation to vote. L'Essentiel, is the second most visited and commented national news website: It is essentially read by the French speaking community living or working in Luxembourg. Supposing that online forums are representative of the general opinion, we would expect that the comments of the online forum from RTL should be strongly against the extension right of foreigners (around 80%). On the opposite, the online forums that are commented by the foreigners living or commuting to Luxembourg for their work, should be much more in favour to offer new political rights to foreigners.

⁸ As far as writers in forum are concerned (n:225), these were 6.8% among phone respondents and 13.4% among the internet respondents (n: 615). Concerning the forum readers, they were respectively 47.8% for the phone respondents and 59.5% for the internet respondents.

| | Essentiel 1 (FR-January 27) | Essentiel 2 (FR-April 22) | RTL 1 (Lux-April 4) | RTL 2 (Lux-May 9) |
|-----------------------------|--------------------------------|------------------------------|------------------------|----------------------|
| N | 143 | 98 | 109 | 97 |
| Average number words | 45.13 | 50.7 | 80.2 | 104 |
| Mediane nbr of words | 36 | 53 | 50 | 78 |
| nbr of different authors | 80 | 70 | 67 | 51 |
| % of msg by 3 first authors | 25.9 | 12.2 | 15.6 | 20.7 |
| absence respect (%) | 19.6 | 33.7 | 21.1 | 20 |
| % of msg with reciprocity | 72.7 | 82.7 | 31.2 | 34.7 |
| % of msg with opinion | 59.4 | 62.2 | 67.9 | 56.3 |
| <i>opinion expressed</i> | (n=81) | (n=61) | (n:74) | (n:56) |
| yes | 40.7 | 31.1 | 24.3 | 12.5 |
| no | 50.6 | 62.3 | 74.3 | 87.5 |
| other | 8.6 | 6.6 | 1.4 | 0 |

Our hypotheses are largely verified. Based on the messages that have expressed an opinions - that correspond to more than half to the messages (see “% msg with opinions”) - the messages expressed in the two Luxembourgish speaking forums largely correspond to the referendum outcome with 74.3% of the negative opinions for RTL 1 and 87.5% for RTL 2. On the opposite, the messages expressed in the French speaking forums tend to be more favourable with 50.6 % and 62.3% of negative opinions. It is interesting to note, that even though it is less marked than for Luxembourgish forums, the French speaking forums present a level of negative opinions that is higher than one could have expected. A initial qualitative reading of the messages that looks at the justification of the opinions suggest that there are two main reasons for that. The first is that many foreigners are against such a measure because they consider, among other things, that voting right should be connected to the acquiring the nationality of the country, because they are not interested, or because they respect the national identity. The second reason is that many Luxembourgish citizens have participated in these forums by defending the idea that voting right should not be extended to foreigners.

The coding of the forums also looked at criteria aiming at assessing their deliberative quality (see Kies 2010), as these contribute to explain differences that could be further explored the assess role they (could) play in a systematic deliberative approach. If we look at the average number of words, we observe that the Luxembourgish messages contain in average significantly more words than the French ones, suggesting that its users are more likely to provide information and express opinions that are justified (Coleman et al. 2002). Another important deliberative criterion is discursive equality, aiming to measure if the debates is not dominated, as this often the case, by a limited number of “super-participants”. To evaluate

the level of discursive equality we look at the level of concentration of the forum by observing what is the proportion of posting of the three most active users. With the exception of one forum (Essentiel 1) where the three most active users were responsible of one quarter of the messages (26%), the other forums present a level of concentration that appear to be in the average (RTL 2 with 21%) or even low (Essentiel 2 with 12% and RTL 1 with 16%). This suggests in other words than three out of the four forums were characterized by a fair level of “distribution of voices”. As far as the respect is concerned, the four forums presented a rather high proportion of message that were considered (rather) non respectful. Such a high score could be expected due to the very sensitive nature of the topic. This being said, this absence of respect did not appear to be detrimental for the ongoing of the debates as the level of reciprocity - that measures the proportion of messages referring to a precedent message – has not been affected by the absence of respect but by the architecture of the forum. We note indeed that for the Essentiel that provides a forum with threads - i.e. that is a system with an initial message and sub messages, corresponding generally to reaction to it - is much more likely to lead to reciprocal forums of debates than basic types of forums that do not provide any architectural distinction of the messages.

Findings for active and passive users of forums

Method

Our first dependent variable is active usage, coded as a dummy indicating whether a respondent to post-referendum survey was active or not on a political online forum. The second dependent variable is reading also coded as a dummy indicating whether a respondent was reading online forums. The independent variables included in these models are (see Appendices A and B for a more detailed description of the data): 1) Age, for which we distinguished five categories from younger to older; 2) Interest in politics in general, based on four categories from high to low; 3) Gender; 4) Education, that is also subdivided in four categories from lower to higher; 5) Interest in the political campaign measured also based on four categories from high to low; 6) respondents’ subjective left-right positioning, which locates them on a 10-points left-right scale, from left to right, 7) how people have voted to the referendum question of the extension of voting right to foreigners with two options (yes and no); 8) whether respondents have voted in the last general election of 2013 for a non-governmental party - intended as a party that was never in the governmental coalition- or a governmental party, i.e. a party that is or was in the past or present coalition.

Finding for active users of forums

We now turn to a statistical model in order to assess which factors have an actual effect on the probability of posting messages on a web-forum at the occasion of the 2015 referendum when controlled for alternative explanatory variables. In the first model only socio-demographic variables are entered. The second model further includes variables regarding respondents' interest for the campaign. And the third model adds variables reflecting political values as measured by their subjective left-right position and previous voting behaviour, by their vote at the referendum and by distinguishing governmental versus non-governmental parties. Since with models using dummies as dependent variables the relationship between variables is not assumed to be linear but logistic, assessing the impact of each independent variable is not straightforward, but we can learn from the significance and direction of the coefficients presented in the table. These are odds ratios (labelled as $\exp(B)$) for which values between 0 and 1 indicate in our case that the probability of being an active poster is smaller for the category at hand than for the reference category, whilst values higher than 1 indicate that this probability is greater than for the reference category. For instance in Model 1 of Table 1 and using the 18-24 years age category as reference category, we see that respondents with any other (higher) category is more likely to be an active forum users than the 18-24 years category. For continuous variables these values indicate negative and positive relationships with the dependent variable respectively, for instance in Model 3 a coefficient below 1 as the one we get for left-right position indicates that left-wing voters (those who chose to locate themselves closer to the extreme left and therefore closer to 1 on the 10-points scale) are more likely to be SV users.

Binary logistic regression explaining the active participation in forums - ($\exp(B)$)

| | <i>Model 1</i> | <i>Model 2</i> | <i>Model 3</i> |
|---|----------------|----------------|----------------|
| <i>Age (ref: 18-24)</i> | | | |
| 25-34 | 4.974*** | 5.528*** | 4.82*** |
| 35-49 | 3.264*** | 3.978*** | 3.809*** |
| 50-64 | 2.63** | 3.089*** | 2.863*** |
| 65 and + | 2.551** | 2.534** | 2.428** |
| sexe (ref male) | 0.481*** | 0.509*** | 0.494*** |
| <i>Educ (ref: Prim. and second 1st cycle)</i> | | | |
| secondary 2nd cycle | 0.928 | 1.162 | 1.055 |
| higher edu (≤ 3 years) | 1.418 | 1.743 | 1.538 |
| higher edu (≥ 4 years) | 1.853* | 2.3** | 2.131** |
| <i>Interest for campaign (ref: very interested)</i> | | | |
| rather interested | | 0.403*** | 0.439*** |
| rather non interested | | 0.188*** | 0.211*** |
| not at all interested | | 0.197*** | 0.23*** |
| Left-Right positionning | | | 0.843** |
| Vote on ref (ref=no) | | | 1.3 |
| gov versus non gov party (ref: non gov party) | | | 0.523** |
| Constante | 0.130*** | 0.209*** | 1.14 |
| Pseudo-R2 (Nagelkerke) | 0.69 | 0.143 | 0.167 |
| N included | 692 | 692 | 692 |

NB: sign $\leq 0,1^*; 0,05^{**}; 0,01^{***}$

Several socio-demographic indicators included in Model 1 appear to active participation in forums. The clearest examples are the age and gender of the respondent. Concerning age, the effect is highly statistically significant for all the comparisons showing that all the age categories older than the reference category (people age 18-24) are more likely to post in forums. The two age categories that are most likely to post in online forums are the 25-34 and 35-49 categories. This result remains robust in all models. Concerning gender, women are much less likely than men to actively post in political forum and as for age this tendency remains robust in all the models. As far as education is concerned, the only category that appears to significantly more likely to use online forum is the respondents who have a very high education (4 years and plus) and, interestingly, this tendency increases for Model 2 and Model 3. This is a rather unexpected result could be explained by the fact online forums debates, still requires some writing skills and some reasoning and arguing capacities that are more likely to be found among the more educated population.

Our ‘socio demographics-only’ model reaches a Pseudo R2 of 0.69, but our predictive capacity increases to 0.143 when we enter the variable interest in the political campaign in Model 2. The variable appears to be highly significant indicating that the more interested you are in the political campaign the more likely you are to post a message in a political forum. It confirms what could be expected. The third model which adds the variables reflecting political preferences, while it increases just marginally the predictive capacity of the model (Pseudo R2 of 0.167), indicates that people positioning themselves of the left of the spectrum are more likely to post messages in forums and that people privileging non-governmental parties are much more likely to post in online forums than people voting for governmental parties. This phenomenon has at least two explanation. First non-governmental parties are composed by parties which all promote strong citizens participation and empowerment. Second, the voters of the largest parties among the non-governmental parties are also those who share the most clear-cut position on the referendum issue: the extreme left party electorate (the Left) is among to the strongest promoters of voting right of foreigners and the Souverainist party (ADR), is the ones that mostly reject it. Third, compared to governmental parties, non-governmental parties leaders and voters are more likely to use alternative ways of communication (social media, forum, ect.) to compensate their differential of visibility in the mainstream media (television, radio and press).

Finding for forums readers

Differently from the active usage of forums, none of the variables analysed in the precedent models helps us explaining the propensity for reading forums except the variable interest in politics that is added in model 2. This means that the informative usage of online forums (which for recall concerns 58% of the respondents) is well distributed among the different socio-demographic and political categories of the population. What makes the difference - as this is the case for most source of information - is the “interest in campaign”. And this factor is highly significant as the predictive capacity of the model raises from a Pseudo R2 of 0.08 (model 1) to a Pseudo R2 of 0.116 (model 2).

Binary logistic regression on propensity of reading forums - ($\exp(B)$)

| | <i>Model 1</i> | <i>Model 2</i> | <i>Model 3</i> |
|--|----------------|----------------|----------------|
| <i>Age (ref: 18-24)</i> | | | |
| 25-34 | 1.407 | 1.421 | 1.456 |
| 35-49 | 1.115 | 1.199 | 1.208 |
| 50-64 | 1.179 | 1.323 | 1.329 |
| 65 and + | 1.171 | 1.149 | 1.164 |
| sexe (ref male) | 0.949 | 0.983 | 0.978 |
| <i>Educ (ref: Prim. and second 1st cycle)</i> | | | |
| secondary 2nd cycle | 0.961 | 1.064 | 1.022 |
| higher edu (≤ 3 years) | 0.861 | 0.997 | 0.941 |
| higher edu (≥ 4 years) | 1.211 | 1.359 | 1.315 |
| <i>Interest for campaign (ref: very interested)</i> | | | |
| rather interested | | 0.948 | 0.956 |
| rather non interested | | 0.291*** | 0.294*** |
| not at all interested | | 0.257*** | 0.252*** |
| Left-Right positionning | | | 0.933 |
| Vote on ref (ref=no) | | | 1.309 |
| <i>gov versus non gov party (ref: non gov party)</i> | | | |
| Constante | 1.37 | 1.902 | 1.608 |
| Pseudo-R2 (Nagelkerke) | 0.08 | 0.116 | 0.12 |
| N included | 694 | 694 | 694 |

NB: sign $\leq 0,1^*$; $0,05^{**}$; $0,01^{***}$

Final remarks

There are three main conclusions that can be drawn from our analysis. The first is that the opinions expressed in the online forum (for or against) appear to be representative of the general public opinion and in particular the ones of the national voters. If such findings are confirmed and appear to be valid in other contexts, it would imply that the online forums could become an alternative measure of the public opinion that could become complementary to the traditional opinion polls. In the context of this research we plan to further evaluate the internal robustness of these findings by coding the other online forums that occurred in the two media during the political campaign. This corresponds to seven forum for Essentiel for a total of 862 comments and to 15 forums for RTL for a total of 2105 messages. Another related research question to be further explored concerns the internal quality of the online

forum based the on deliberative criteria and through content analysis. This would be useful for further exploring the arguments that have been elaborated in the web-forums and the weight they had on the debate, by observing for instance whether some participants explicitly changed their opinions. From a methodological perspective it would be particularly interesting to see if we find the same arguments and discursive dynamics that occur in focus groups on the same topic.

The second finding concerns the active users of the web-forums, that is the ones that have posted messages during the political campaign. We observed that they represent more than one voter in 10 and that they represent a specific category of the population: they are much more likely to be found to belong to the active population (25-49), to be men, well educated, interested in politics and to be left-wing. To put it differently the opinion leaders emerging from the online forums seem not to differ drastically from the ones emerging from “traditional” context of discussion. A finding that may be more interesting and that should be further explored is that active users of the forum are also more likely to be voters of non-governmental parties.

The third finding concerns the identity of the readers of the online forums corresponding to more than half of the voters. Differently from the active users, readers appear to be present in all the categories of the population as long as they express a strong interest in politics (and in the political campaign). Interestingly this implies that online forums could, as for the mainstream media, influence voters independently from their initial political preferences. Further research is needed however for evaluating to what extend the messages expressed in online forums really influence the opinions of its readers. The data issued from the post-referendum survey do not allow to have an answer to this question.

From a systemic perspective these findings suggest that online forum is a discursive arena that should be taken into consideration in any attempt to map processes of deliberation in the decision making process. They can play several relevant functions corresponding to the ones generally attributed to the weak public spaces. It is not the place where we should expect agreement to be reached or high level of empathy and reflexivity to be found. It is a rather “tuff” space, as suggested by the high level of disrespects, where people who have a strong opinions express it and (often) defend it against people who do not share them. Despite that, it

often reflects the state of the real opinion in society, an opinion that is often not present in the mainstream media.

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