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**Public Participation and
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**Public Participation and Climate Governance:
Opening up or Closing down Policy Options**

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1 Introduction¹

Tied to a broader participatory turn in political discourse and techno-scientific governance, public participation is increasingly hailed as a significant and necessary component of climate governance. At an international level, the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development, the Aarhus Convention on Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision-making, and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters as well as Article 6 of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change affirm the importance of public participation in developing and implementing successful climate change policies.

Grounded in the normative assumption that good governance in a liberal democracy rests on the active consent of the governed, the appeal of public participation lies with its promise to provide an alternative to elite, technocratic modes of public policy and decision-making. Providing ways in which citizens can engage in public discussions and express concerns about environmental and other techno-scientific issues, participatory initiatives grant voice to those who would otherwise be excluded from policy discussions. Properly implemented, public participation has the capacity to improve collective decision-making, to foster social learning, and to facilitate the uptake of environmental policies (Dryzek, 2006; Gastil & Levine, 2005). Yet, in spite of growing recognition of the importance of public participation, there is limited room for popular, democratic decision-making in climate governance at national and international levels (Fisher, 2010; McGregor, 2011). Much work, innovation and learning remains in order to bring the principles of public participation to bear on actual climate governance practices.

The purpose of this working paper is to raise questions about the exercise of power in formal participatory initiatives on climate change by drawing attention to framing effects. The framing of an issue informs the diagnosis of the problem, the selection of legitimate viewpoints, the definition of alternatives, as well as the prescriptions for how the problem should be addressed. Realized through the design, implementation and interpretation of formal participatory events, framing can influence whether deliberative initiatives ultimately serve to ‘open up’ or ‘close down’ policy discussions (Stirling, 2008). This distinction is of crucial importance, for it poses the question of whether public participation is geared towards containing or augmenting the diversity of possible views and perspectives to inform policy.

World Wide Views on Global Warming (WWViews) provides an illustrative example for this analysis. Organized by the Danish Board of Technology (DBT) and the Danish Cultural Institute (DCI), WWViews is an experimental methodology in convening cross-national public deliberations to inform UN decision-making processes. While deliberative public participation processes are typically deployed at local and national levels, a more recent development has been to use deliberative approaches across multiple countries to deal with complex issues that exceed the governance capacities of nation-states (Andersson

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& Shahrokh, 2012). The WWViews process represents one of the most ambitious cross-national deliberations to date in terms of its scope and complexity. As such, it provides an important occasion to reflect on framing effects of public participation with climate change. Taking a critical but not dismissive stance, this analysis illustrates how the framing of WWViews served to close down the range of possible perspectives available for global policy discussions.

In what follows, the first section provides background on the concept of public participation, highlighting the diversity of meanings and plurality of approaches that constitute its perceived purposes and outcomes. The second section examines in more detail the significance of framing effects for deliberative participatory practices, situating these within a heuristic that examines whether these practices serve to open up or close down policy choices. The third section provides a detailed description and analysis of WWViews on Global Warming in terms of its framing effects. The paper concludes with a recommendation to stakeholders of public participation, including organizers, facilitators, policy-makers and participants alike, to reflect more substantively on the orchestration of the processes by which climate change is defined and participatory publics convened.

2 Background to Public Participation

The literature on public participation in general, and deliberative participation in particular, has grown considerably over the past few decades, signaling what has been called the participatory turn in environmental policy making (Bäckstrand, 2003). Since the 1990s, several transformations have taken place in environmental governance in which public participation has become increasingly normalized, standardized and institutionalized. This transformation is based on a broader acceptance of the need for inclusion of a range of stakeholders and voices in more open, deliberative policy forums. It is also related to the increasing complexity of environmental conflicts, which have resulted in greater public sensitivity to risk and uncertainty, the diffusion of knowledge and information-generating capacities to non-traditional actors and greater interest in stakeholder and citizen rights (Irwin, 2006; Fischer, 2000). Moreover, the increasing significance of transnational politics and governance in arenas such as climate change and biodiversity loss has dramatically influenced public participation in ways that will likely amplify in coming years as new political forums emerge in response to novel configurations of actors and claims, and as local practices and identities increasingly supplement global science and policy (Martello & Jasanoff, 2004). Taken together, we see a growing emphasis on and sophistication of efforts to construct and enroll publics into climate governance at global, national and regional scales.

Public participation is a slippery concept that can mean different things to different people, depending on the context of use. The term participation spans a broad spectrum including individual attitudes, beliefs and lifestyle changes, as well as collective interactions in the form of formal facilitated deliberation, informal public debates, and uninvited activist protests. Some descriptions set normative boundaries for what constitutes true or proper participation. A classic example is the *ladder of participation* (Arnstein, 1969) in which participation is portrayed as varying steps, ranging from weak forms such as information delivery to stronger ones such as the sharing of power in decision-making.

Others take a less normative and more pragmatic approach, wherein public participation is recognized in different contexts with different goals and purposes (Einsiedel, 2013; Whitmarsh, O'Neill, & Lorenzoni, 2010). Eschewing the requirement of 'true' participation as an impact on decision-making, these definitions consider the broad purpose of participation as encompassing policy making, public dialogue and knowledge production. In practical settings, these purposes can overlap, and are hence not necessarily mutually exclusive.

Another angle is to distinguish between the spaces for participation in terms of invented or invited spaces (Cornwall, 2002). Invented spaces refer to bottom-up, citizen and social movement driven processes. Social action is uninvited, and can take the form of media campaigns, public debates, or demonstrations. By contrast, invited spaces tend to be top-down in origin. These formal participatory initiatives are pre-planned by a particular authority or institution that sets the agenda, selects the appropriate background information, recruits and selects participants as well as creates and disseminates the final report.

Alternatively, public participation can be categorized in terms of the flow of knowledge and information in terms of an information deficit model and a civic model. The rationale for the former is primarily instrumental. Although publics are seen as necessary to establish effective policy measures, they are viewed as ill equipped to make decisions and take action on the environment, due primarily to perceived ignorance of the science at hand. Under this model, public participation is limited to debates over pre-existing policy options, with very little room to advance alternative agenda setting or policy recommendations. This approach can also encompass social marketing initiatives wherein market research, cognitive theory, and strategic communication are employed in order to inspire citizens to modify some aspect of their behavior or accept an existing policy proposal (e.g. Lakoff, 2010; Nisbet, 2009). The information deficit model has been the subject of sustained critique given its inattention to power, its de-contextual and ahistorical approach to science, and its tendency to shield dominant institutional claims and practices from public scrutiny (Brulle, 2010; Moser & Dilling, 2007; Wynne, 1993). The assumption that publics are vacuous in epistemic terms can be read, not as a description of actually existing states of knowledge, but as a projection of the beliefs of institutional actors who are unable or unwilling to reflect on their own biases about the relations between science and its various publics (Leach & Scoones, 2005; Wynne, 1993).

By contrast, a civic approach to public participation starts from the assumption that lay publics are knowledgeable and capable of offering important insights into policy decisions. To date, deliberative democracy has been the central theoretical underpinning for the development of civic approaches to public participation (Brulle, 2010; Dryzek, 2000; Phillips, 2012). Deliberative democracy is defined as "any one of a family of views according to which the public deliberation of free and equal citizens is the core of legitimate political decision-making and self-governance" (Bohman, 1998, p. 401). The guiding premise of deliberative democracy is that public views, particularly on unfamiliar matters, are best fostered through processes of open discussion and deliberation. Deliberative democracy challenges the assumption that people act or vote in accordance with clear preferences and well-established interests.

This assumption does not line up with a context in which rapid scientific and technological change generates complex questions and policy situations. These changes are too uncertain to be resolved by referenda, parliamentary elections or periodic public opinion polls; rather, open and flexible deliberation is required, the quality of which purportedly improves as more points of view and positions are considered openly and even-handedly.

Unlike the linear model of communication enacted in information deficit approaches, deliberative approaches are marked by an interactive model of communication that is “first, capable of inducing reflection, second, non-coercive, and, third, capable of linking the particular experience of an individual or group with some more general point or principle” (Dryzek, 2006, p. 52). Deliberative communication processes can create different forms of rationality and civic virtue, which can in turn form the basis for environmentally and socially sound decisions. Arguments in favor of the virtues of deliberative democracy have fueled the development of various practical experiments in public participation ranging from consensus conferences, citizen juries, focus groups, and deliberative polling.

While deliberative approaches to public participation have many supporters, critics question the validity of deliberation for fostering a more robust and inclusive process for addressing environmental issues. In providing a vision of democratic politics as an unhurried exchange of arguments between reasonable persons guided by principles of equality, deliberative democracy has been criticized for being naïve about and blind to existing power relations and external structuring factors, such as corporate control or capitalist ownership (Dryzek, 2006). Some argue that the ideal of dominance-free communication through dialogue and deliberation is not only impossible to attain, it is also dangerous: by creating an illusion of a dominance-free space, deliberation can mask existing power relations and diverging knowledge interests (Mouffe, 2005; Phillips, 2011). Echoing the deficit model of public participation, deliberation can be implemented as a means to foster action on pre-determined policy agendas, leading some scholars to conclude that experiments in public deliberation with techno-scientific issues amount to new (civic) wine in old (deficit) bottles (Grove-White, 2001).

Critics also caution that the democratic potential of deliberative initiatives can be compromised from the outset by a deeper set of assumptions that position public meanings, or issue framings, as the domain of expert institutions (Wynne, 2005). Rather than open up public issues to diverse meanings and knowledge, deliberative forums can inadvertently close down public debate where only expert issue framings are considered valid, reasonable and credible (Stirling, 2008). Deliberative practices are informed by a scientific ethos, and tend to be predicated on the assumption that science is comprised of an egalitarian community of truth seekers abstracted from and unencumbered by cultural, political-and economic contexts (Elam & Bertilsson, 2003). Scientific claims, practices and institutional commitments, while a necessary input into deliberative processes, are often not subject to the deliberative process itself, thereby shielding a significant source of power from public scrutiny. Moreover, the emphasis on consensus as a desirable goal, managed through dialogical practices, can foreclose the possibility of competing visions of radically different social orders, contributing to a de-radicalization of politics (Mouffe, 2005; Swyndegoux, 2010).

3 Framing and Power: Opening up or Closing down Policy Options

The burgeoning field of research on public participation tends to focus on processes internal to these initiatives such as their normative dimensions (whether fair, representative, ‘truly’ deliberative), their outputs (specific recommendations and reports) or their outcomes (uptake in policy discussions, social learning, enhanced civic capacity, and so forth) (see, for example, Rowe & Frewer 2001). These analytic methods tend to skirt more tangled questions about power and the consequences of powerful ‘framing’ effects on deliberative processes (Stirling, 2008). The choice of policy questions, the setting of agendas, the structuring of debate, the selection of background material, the recruitment of participants – all provide ample room for the exercise of power. Although these factors exert a determining influence on the process and results of public deliberation, they are often considered external to analysis, excluding considerations of framing and power from reflection.

A useful heuristic for addressing framing effects of public participation is to ask whether the purpose of participatory initiatives is to ‘open up’ or ‘close down’ policy options (Stirling, 2008). If the intent of the initiative is to simplify and aggregate the diversity of public interests and perspectives in order to develop a clear, prescriptive recommendation for decision-makers, then the approach is one of ‘closing down’. The output of this approach typically involves highlighting a small set of possible courses of action that make sense under the dominant framing condition.

If the purpose of public participation is to ‘open up’ discussion and policy choice, the emphasis shifts towards posing alternative structuring frames by focusing on neglected issues, including marginalized perspectives, considering ignored uncertainties and examining different possibilities. Under an ‘opening up’ approach, deliberation focuses on generating and comparing a range of frameworks, rather than forcing discussion into a singular framework. The outputs to policy-makers, accordingly, are less targeted and more exploratory, highlighting ambiguous findings, contending interpretations and dissenting views. While the results may be ambiguous and equivocal in terms of defining a commonly agreed upon policy direction, the openness of the process can accommodate more diverse options for decision-makers to consider.

The initial framing of the issue at hand can contribute to the closing down of policy options, particularly if dominant frames are mobilized. Dominant frames refer to situations in which a problem is defined as being of one type, or of having one possible solution (Calvert & Warren, 2013). If some frames are presented and perceived as more salient or reasonable than others from the outset, they can foreclose the possibility of examining other avenues, reasons and arguments. This poses significant epistemic problems for public deliberation. Dominant frames can prevent people from engaging with less commonly articulated interpretations and beliefs that may provide innovative avenues for social and political change.

4 Dominant Framing of Climate Change

One of the challenges that climate change poses for public deliberation is that it tends to be approached via a dominant frame. This dominant frame is based on an assumption that climate exists ‘out there’ in the world apart from our interpretations of it, that it is inherently global in scale, and that it is amenable to measurement, quantification and ultimately, control (Hulme, 2010; Rayner & Malone, 1998). This framing arises from the unique configuration of the *global climate regime*, a term which refers to the emergence of anthropogenic climate change as an intergovernmental policy issue (Bodansky 2001, 2011). Commencing with the establishment of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) in 1988, the signing of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) at the Earth Summit in Rio in 1992 established the central mission of this regime as the stabilization of greenhouse gas concentrations in the atmosphere to prevent dangerous anthropogenic interference with the climate system. The global climate regime rests upon the capability to grant a degree of uniformity and comparability across regions through quantitative targets and indexes. This is not only a consequence of the political process of international negotiations, but is also tied to the ways in which climate change has been defined and accepted as a global issue in the first place.

According to Clark Miller (2004), the creation of the IPCC reinforced and perpetuated the view that the Earth's climate is unified and global, a view that was tied to an emerging environmental movement in which the fate of the planet as a whole was perceived to be in peril. The subsequent reports of the IPCC, issued in 1990, 1996, 2001, 2007 and 2013, in turn buttressed arguments about the necessity of global political cooperation. For Miller, the IPCC not only set into motion assumptions about the appropriate scale of political action, it also contributed to assumptions about which forms of knowledge are legitimate for policy and public debate. The tendency of the IPCC and the UNFCCC process more generally to approach climate change as a technical issue that can be resolved through certain mechanisms (technological or market-based) contributes to the belief that scientists and, to a lesser degree economists, have the sole authority to author and adjudicate public debates about climate change (see Bäckstrand & Lövbrand, 2007 for a similar argument). A recent study examining the disciplinary inputs to the third assessment report of the IPCC demonstrates that the cited sources are heavily dominated by the natural sciences, especially the Earth Sciences, and economics (Bjurström & Polk, 2011).

For Hulme (2010, p. 559), the ‘globalizing impulses’ of climate science serve to reduce the physical, social and cultural complexity of human - environment interactions to quantitative indexes for policy and regulatory purposes. Global mean temperature, for instance, has become an established icon in debates about global climate change, providing a unifying index around which arguments about desirable environmental futures are organized, regardless of geographical region or cultural particularity. Economic indexes of climate change, exemplified by the Stern Review (2007) in which the economic risks associated with climate change are converted into single metrics of globalized monetary value, contributes to a similar form of unification of public debate. Collapsing the complexity and heterogeneity of the biophysical, economic and cultural factors associated with climate change into

monolithic numerical signatures has political implications as it simplifies both nature and society in public policy (Fogel, 2005, p. 121)

Such universalizing discourses, moreover, can serve problematic political agendas by hiding the complexities of concrete inequalities such as the distribution of power, costs, profits and responsibilities (Lahsen, 2004, p. 151). Given that the dominant frame of climate change is often presented as unproblematic, objective and universal, it can stifle the emergence of alternative explanations of the causes of the problem as well as alternate socio-political imaginaries for political and social organization (Swyndegoux, 2010).

5 World Wide Views on Global Warming

World Wide Views (WWViews) provides an illustrative example for examining the framing effects of public participation initiatives. WWViews is an innovative methodology for enrolling people from across the world in deliberations about global policy. The intent of WWViews is to make people aware of global policy issues such as climate change and biodiversity loss, as well as to provide a platform to make their voices heard. To date, two public deliberations have taken place: WWViews on Global Warming in September 2009 and WWViews on Biodiversity in September 2012.

Planned and organized by the Danish Board of Technology (DBT) and hosted by a network of non-governmental organizations, universities, and science communication institutions, WWViews on Global Warming gave invited participants from a range of nations the opportunity to discuss and offer feedback on key themes addressed in the negotiations taking place at COP 15, held in Copenhagen in December 2009. In total, 4400 participants from across 38 countries were enrolled from the time the event started in Australia on September 26 to when it ended in the western United States 36 hours later.

Intended as a mechanism for representing the views of global citizens in a formal and organized fashion, WWViews was developed in accordance with the following criteria (Bedsted & Klüver, 2009, p. 6). First, the event needed to be inexpensive and relatively easy to implement in order to be feasible for participation by potentially all countries in the world. In order to keep costs manageable, WWViews was organized as a series of smaller national meetings rather than as a large global meeting. Second, it required a clear link to policymaking at both national and global levels. Third, outputs from the event needed to be in a form that could be easily communicated to policymakers. Finally, participants were provided with sufficient information as well as given the opportunity to discuss with others before offering their position on policy issues.

The WWViews process was structured as follows. A few weeks prior to the event, an information booklet was distributed to each participant, outlining the background information the DBT deemed necessary as a starting point for discussion. Approximately half of this document was devoted to the basics of climate science, drawing from the International Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) Fourth Assessment Report (2007). The remainder examined existing and proposed climate treaties, proposals for distributing responsibility for reducing greenhouse gas emissions across countries, as well as

potential financial and technological solutions. On the day of the consultation, four structured thematic sessions were held in which groups of eight to ten participants discussed the key issues under the guidance of a facilitator. A short video was shown at the start of each session to reinforce the material in the information booklet. After a brief discussion, participants were asked to cast votes on multiple choice style questions, clustered into the following four themes: climate change and its consequences; long-term goals and commitments; dealing with greenhouse gas emissions; and the economy of technology and adaptation. To balance the restrictive format of the predefined questions, time was provided in a separate session, held at the end of the day, for participants to formulate and vote on their own recommendations for policy makers. Throughout the event, participant responses to the multiple choice style questions were uploaded in real-time to a web interface to facilitate cross-national and cross-regional comparisons (www.wvviews.org). These responses formed the basis for a final report written by the DBT that was distributed to national delegations attending COP15, and more broadly through media networks.

WWViews has been upheld as an example of the possibilities of enacting public deliberation at a global scale (e.g. Dryzek, 2013; Nisbet, 2009). According to Moira Deslandes, the Executive Director of the International Association for Public Participation, WWViews is “a beacon to what might be possible in an international environment” and as an initiative that has “set a new platform for the potential of international public participation.”²

Others have been less sanguine about its implications. For instance, in an analysis of the Danish arm of WWViews on Global Warming, Phillips (2011) maintains that the top-down nature of WWViews contributed to an inevitable exclusion of voices, particularly those that did not align with the dominant frame of climate change deployed in this initiative. Similarly, Blue and Medlock (2014) argue that participants of WWViews were situated as consumers of scientific knowledge tasked with responding to a limited slate of policy options that they had no role in creating, vetting or altering. While this design choice enabled the WWViews process meet the initial objectives set forth by the DBT, it created a top-down, rigidly structured public arena with limited opportunity for participants to bring alternative problem-framings or perspectives to the discussion. The dominant framing of climate change restricted public discussion about climate change policy to the control of greenhouse gas emissions through technical and market-based fixes. This framing had consequences for the types of political agency accorded to participants as it privileged from the outset certain viewpoints and social actors. Moreover, this framing carried with it an assumption that reasonable people across the world can and will perceive environmental threats and challenges in the same way, especially if they are shown how to look at them by western scientific institutions. This assumption is questionable as judgments about the nature and severity of environmental risk invariably incorporate tacit understandings, assumptions and meanings, and these are by no means shared universally. WWViews ultimately erased the differences among and

² Quote from Teknologi-Radet: the online newsletter of the Danish Board of Technology. Accessed at: <http://www.tekno.dk/subpage.php3?article=1735&toppic=kategori11&language=uk>. Accessed online Sept 15, 2013.



within nation-states in order to render the results of this public deliberation commensurate for comparative purposes. In short, it served to close down the possibility of alternative framings to emerge to inform public policy.

6 Conclusion

The globalization of climate governance provides an important occasion for considering the implications of ‘opening up’ and ‘closing down’ public deliberation for policy purposes. When science is used for diagnostic and predictive purposes, as is so often the case in environmental policy-making, this can lead to a narrow framing of policy problems (Martello & Jasanoff, 2004; Stirling, 2008). The stated objective of the UNFCCC is to prevent dangerous climate change, primarily through the mitigation of greenhouse gases by technological or market-based measures. The efficiency of this issue framing comes at the cost of oversimplifying the world that the climate regime seeks to regulate and can serve to overlook or marginalize unorthodox or non-scientific perspectives as well as alternative causes and explanations of the issue at hand. These alternative perspectives can all too easily be elided in formal public deliberation settings where organizers choose a particular frame to facilitate discussion and to deliver tangible results to decision-makers. The problem lies not with selective framing of the issue as such, but with the assumption that certain frames of climate change, particularly those derived from authoritative sources such as the IPCC, represent a neutral and otherwise apolitical means of codifying the natural world.

At first glance, formal public deliberations on climate change can appear to be an unquestionable pursuit of a good cause. Deeper reflection and examination, however, can reveal operations of power realized through framing effects that can delimit the democratic potential of these initiatives. If the intent of public participation is to close down policy options by limiting the perimeters of public deliberation to a dominant issue frame, then the conditioning assumptions of dominant frames are not called into question. In such instances, public participation has an instrumental merit of educating participants, convening consensus as well as conveying practical and clear messages to policy-makers. On the other hand, if the intent of public participation is to open up policy options, the focus and the outputs are quite different. Here, emphasis would lie with examining different framing conditions and assumptions, and with generating alternative discourses and courses of action. This can in turn reveal the implications of underlying assumptions and framing conditions of dominant policy directives.

Experiments in convening public deliberation to address global environmental issues can compromise the quality of deliberation if they are closed to diverse discourses and frames of meaning. Given the power of scientific discourse to authorize public meanings about global environmental issues, this tendency warrants continued and persistent attention. The exertion of power through framing effects is not necessarily negative as power can be directed towards divergent ends. The point that this analysis makes is that these power dynamics warrant closer examination by all stakeholders of public participation. If public participation is geared towards opening up policy debates and hence to democratic ends, then the framings and implicit practices and meanings of scientific institutions should

be rendered explicit and accountable to democratic debate and negotiation.

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