

How To Get a Better Informed European Public

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As surely as night follows day, a [low turnout in this week's European Parliament elections](#) will be followed by the usual hand-wringing about the European Union's "democratic deficit". How much longer can the EU continue as a project controlled by elites and disregarded by the masses, whose only role seems to be to wreak occasional havoc by rejecting EU treaties in referendums? How can European political and economic integration flourish without an integrated European public opinion?

Professor James Fishkin, a social scientist at Stanford University, thinks there may be a solution to the problem of the "democratic deficit". As he explained to me over a coffee on Wednesday, he and some colleagues [have just conducted an experiment](#) in which a balanced sample of 348 Europeans from the EU's 27 countries were brought to Brussels for a three-day dialogue on the elections and the policy issues surrounding them. This is a procedure known as "[deliberative polling](#)", a concept Professor Fishkin invented in 1988.

One outcome of the exercise was that as the participants became more informed about the EU, so their opinions of the EU became more positive. Before the discussions, 37 per cent considered their country's EU membership "a very good thing". Afterwards, the figure was 52 per cent.

Another outcome was that many participants changed their voting intentions as a result of the dialogue. Beforehand, 40 per cent said they would vote for mainstream centre-right parties, 22 per cent for socialists, 9 per cent for centrist liberals and 8 per cent for Greens. After the exercise, support for the centre-right dropped to 30 per cent, the socialists were almost unchanged at 21 per cent and 8 per cent respectively, and the Greens shot up to 18 per cent.

The rise in support for the Greens came about as a result of detailed discussions among the participants on climate change. They were asked to choose between the view that "we should do everything possible to combat climate change even if that hurts the economy" and the alternative view that "we should do everything possible to maximise economic growth, even if that hurts efforts to combat climate change". Before the discussions, 49 per cent wanted to emphasise the fight against climate change. Afterwards, this figure rose to 61 per cent.

However, similar discussions on immigration did not produce a shift in opinion. Before the dialogue, 23 per cent wanted to send illegal immigrants back to their countries, whereas 40 per cent wanted to legalise their status. Afterwards, the respective figures were virtually the same at 22 per cent and 40 per cent.

Professor Fishkin thinks that "deliberative polling" helps to connect policymakers to the general public in a constructive way, because it gives the former an insight into what the latter would support if they knew, thought and talked more about the issues. It is a tool with more potential than a standard opinion poll because an ordinary poll is merely a snapshot of people's views, no matter what their level of knowledge.

Clearly, the credibility of "deliberative polling" depends on the representativeness of those who take part. But if European leaders are serious about wanting a better informed public and a higher quality of democracy in the EU, they could do worse than study the ideas of the prof from Stanford.

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