

More Informed Voters Select a Parliament in Unprecedented Experiment

Greens Make Dramatic Gains

Public Supports Action on Climate Change and Immigration

What kind of Parliament would Europeans elect if they knew, thought, and talked much more about the issues? An experiment just conducted in Brussels gives a picture of how the votes for Parliament might be different.

A scientific sample of the voters of the entire European Union, representing all 27 countries, gathered for an unprecedented three-day dialogue in Brussels just before the elections. Deliberating in 21 languages, they discussed the issues, read balanced briefing materials, and questioned competing experts and politicians. At the end, they registered their opinions and voting intentions in confidential questionnaires. They discussed two issues—climate change and immigration—in detail. The result was a European Wide “Deliberative Poll” conducted just before the election.¹

By the end of the weekend, many of the participants had changed their views about the issues as well as their vote intentions. They had also become more informed and had changed their sense of identity as Europeans.

Voting Intentions

Participants were asked both before and after deliberation if they intended to vote in the upcoming European elections. Those who intended to vote were asked which party they preferred. As there are over 260 parties standing in the Euro elections across the 27 member states, party preferences were grouped to correspond to the European Parliament’s eight major party groupings.

The deliberative weekend dramatically increased support for the Greens, whose vote share increased from 8% before deliberation to 18% after. Before the weekend, support was strongest for the EPP (40%), PES (22%), Liberal Democrats (9%) and Greens (8%). Afterward, the vote shares changed to 30% for the EPP, 21% for the PES, 8% for the Liberal Democrats, 2% for Independence/Democracy, 4% for the Radical Left, 4% for the Radical Right, 3% for the EuroConservatives, and 18% Greens. Serious deliberation on climate change significantly increased the electoral popularity of the Greens. The electoral impact of deliberation on immigration is less clear.

Climate Change

The respondents were asked to choose between the view that “we should do everything possible to combat climate change even if that hurts the economy” and “we should do everything possible to maximize economic growth, even if that hurts efforts to combat climate change.” Before deliberation 49% wanted to maximize combating

¹ Deliberative Polling® is a trade mark of James S. Fishkin. Any income from the trade mark is used to support research at the Center for Deliberative Democracy, Stanford University.

climate change, After deliberation this rose to 61%. Similarly, respondents were asked to choose between the view that the EU “should reduce greenhouse gas emissions as rapidly and as much as possible even if that means we have to make radical changes in the way we live” and the contrasting view that “the EU should make no effort to reduce greenhouse gas emissions even if that means that climate change will get much worse.” Before deliberation, 72% wanted the EU to do as much as possible. After deliberation this increased to 85%.

After deliberation the participants became more enthusiastic about energy efficiency (increasing from 75% to 84%) and the use of an emissions trading system (increasing from 39% to 49%). Support for renewable energy like wind and solar started high and increased slightly (89% to 91%). But opposition to investing in nuclear energy increased from 35% to 43% and support for investing in biofuels decreased from 55% to 50%.

Immigration

Among all participants, the belief that immigration is an important problem increased from 44% before deliberation to 64% afterwards. Before deliberation, participants were divided between those who want to send illegal immigrants back to their country (23%), and a larger group (40%) that wanted to legalize them. Deliberation left this division virtually unchanged, with equivalent figures of 22% and 40%.

Deliberation affected participants’ views of how governments should deal with immigration. The percentage in favour of reinforcing border controls fell from 66% before deliberation to 59% afterwards. By contrast, those who favoured imposing ‘penalties on employers who hire illegal immigrants’ increased from 74% to 88%.

The deliberators also became more tolerant in relation to the criteria for admitting non-EU immigrants. Before deliberation, 69% considered it important that immigrants be committed to the receiving country’s way of life; after deliberation only 52% did so. There were comparable, though smaller, falls in the importance of ‘coming from a similar culture’ (from 25% to 17%); and in ‘being Christian’ (13% to 9%). This increased tolerance extended to policies for dealing with illegal immigrants living in EU countries. Before deliberation, 63% of participants agreed that ‘illegal immigrants should be eligible for national health care’; afterwards, this figure increased to 71%.

Prior to deliberation, when invited to describe immigrants on a set of five characteristics, 26% of the participants consistently viewed them negatively on all five; 32% consistently viewed them positively. After deliberation, those taking a consistently positive view rose to 39%. For example, the percentage of respondents who considered immigrants ‘honest’ increased from 25% to 34%, while those agreeing that ‘immigrants have a lot to offer our cultural life’ rose from 37% to 43%. In a similar vein, those who thought that ‘immigration increases crime in our society’ fell from 48% to 40%.

Sample Recruitment

The survey house TNS (responsible for the Eurobarometer) interviewed a random sample of 4,384 EU citizens eighteen years-old or older from all 27 member states. The sample was stratified to ensure adequate representation from the smaller countries. Just over 1300 respondents were randomly set aside to serve as a control group. Of the remaining roughly 3,000, some 800 (who had indicated an interest in the event) were invited to attend. Of those, 348 came to Brussels.

Representativeness

The representativeness of the 348 participants can be checked by comparing them to the nonparticipants—the original 4,384 interviewees who did not attend. In terms of age, class and other demographics, the participants and nonparticipants were very similar, although men were slightly over-represented among participants (54%). On the standard 0 to 10 left right scale, participants and non-participants were virtually identical. The two groups also had nearly identical pre-deliberation attitudes on climate change, although the participants had slightly more ‘liberal’ attitudes on immigration. The participants were also more interested in politics, had a stronger sense of civic duty, included somewhat more people intending (at the time of the initial interview) to vote for the EPP supporters and somewhat fewer intending to vote for the PES. These modest differences do not affect the results. The before-after changes in attitudes, vote intentions, and knowledge would be approximately the same if the participants had looked exactly the same as the nonparticipants (and thus the whole sample).

Knowledge

The participants clearly learned a great deal about both immigration and climate change—and also about the EU. They were asked nine knowledge questions, three each about each of those three topics. For each topic, two of those three questions were first asked in the initial interview, while the remaining one was first asked only at the beginning of the event some weeks later. Since the participants begin learning from the moment they are initially interviewed and invited to the event (and are sent the briefing materials well in advance), the six items first asked in the initial interview show a distinctly greater gain than the three asked only on arrival (16.5% versus 7.5%). The participants presumably learned about as much on the latter as on the former; it is just that on the latter our earliest measurement (on arrival) occurs too late to capture all the learning.

There was also a noticeable difference in how much the participants learned by topic. They learned most about immigration (a 20.2% before-after knowledge gain), next most about the EU (10.5%), and least—though still very significantly—about climate

change (9.9%). All these numbers are probably underestimates, because all three indices include one item measured only from arrival.

European Citizenship

Simply participating in a Deliberative Polling event that brought together fellow participants from across the EU had a significant effect on participants' attitudes towards Europe and the EU. Before deliberation 37% of participants considered their country's membership of the EU to be 'a very good thing'. After deliberation, this figure rose to 52%. Before deliberation, 47% of participants considered it their duty to vote in EU elections; after, the equivalent figure was 56%. Before the event, 72% of participants thought of themselves "as just being from" their own country. After deliberation, this percentage fell dramatically to 56%. Exposure to open political discussion among people from all parts of the EU made people less nationalistic and fostered a sense of European identity in addition to national identity.

Event Evaluation

The participants enjoyed and appreciated the experience of the weekend. Asked to rate the event as a whole on 0 to 10 scale, 86% rated it at 8 or above, and 59% gave it a perfect 10. The ratings of the plenary sessions both with politicians and with experts were also high, with each being found useful by 74%. The ratings of the small group discussions were still higher, with 92% finding them useful.

On average, the participants thought the event extremely balanced. Of those who said that they had had read more than half of the briefing materials (a large majority of the participants), roughly two-thirds saw them as balanced, and only 11% saw them as clearly favouring some positions over others. Similarly, 69% agreed that their small group moderator "tried to make sure that opposing arguments were considered, while 86% disagreed that the moderator "sometimes tried to influence the group with her/his ideas."

The participants also considered the quality of the discussion to be high. More than 60% saw their fellow group members as participating equally in the discussion. Almost 90% thought that they "had ample opportunity" to express their own views. 84% felt that their fellow participants "respected what I had to say, even when they didn't agree." They also saw their fellow participants as taking their roles seriously: 87% saw them as "express[ing] what was truly on their mind." Only 18% considered that they "expressed strong views without offering justifications," while only 23% considered that they "had made up their minds [so that] the discussion had little effect on them."

The experience of meeting and talking with other people from all across the continent and from all walks of life also had an impact: 81% thought that they learnt "a lot about people different from me—about who they are and how they live."

Dialogue with Politicians and Experts

The participants alternated small group discussions with trained moderators and plenary sessions in which their questions, developed at length in small groups, were directed at panels of competing experts and politicians. There were three plenaries, the first two with experts on immigration and climate change. The final plenary, on Sunday morning concluded with the participants directing their questions to Estonian President Toomas Hendrik Ilves, former Italian Prime Minister Giuliano Amato, former Danish MEP Jens Peter Bonde and former Belgian Deputy Prime Minister Isabelle Durant.

Sponsors and Partners

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