

That's enough theory about the democratic deficit!

Brussels, April 2 2009: Thousands of EU citizens are going to be polled on their views on two of the hottest EU topics – immigration, and climate change.

Hundreds of them from across the member states will then be invited to Brussels at the end of May for an intensive two-day dialogue with top-level experts.

Then they will be polled again – and their views on these issues will be compared with what they felt before. An identical second poll of the citizens who were not invited to take part in the in-depth discussion will allow a control check, too.

Everyone laments the democratic deficit at the heart of the European Union. Now someone is doing something about it.

Over the coming months, this scientifically-based research project, EuroPolis, is going to test what EU citizens would think about key questions if they had a chance to learn about them in discussions with citizens from all 27 member states. A scientific sample will put all of Europe in one room, under conditions that will promote real reflection on the issues. These citizens will grapple with choices that are often reduced to no more than sound bites. They will have the chance to understand each other across differences of language and nationality. The much-discussed “European public sphere” will come to life for a weekend.

The outcome will help indicate what happens when EU citizens have more information about how the EU works and how it makes policy, and are more aware of what other European citizens think about hot topics. It will offer new answers to questions such as:

- would people make policy choices more in line with their own basic values and beliefs?
- would policy preferences change, and votes follow policy preferences more closely?
- would people give more weight to EU considerations when they vote?
- would talking with citizens from other member states highlight shared interests and issues?
- would stronger bonds with fellow EU citizens increase a sense of belonging to the EU?
- would more of a Europe-wide public sphere increase civic engagement?

The EuroPolis project will provide a real opportunity to assess just how feasible democratic participation can be at European level. It is a testbed for participation in democratic politics. And because the project takes place in the run-up to the European Parliament elections, its surveys of voter behaviour will also throw light on the impact from active discussion of policy.

ENDS

Notes for editors:

During the project, a series of media opportunities will arise – with researchers, with citizens taking part in the study, with EU policymakers, and above all during the dialogue in Brussels, on May 29-30. A steady stream of material will be released to the media through the usual channels over coming weeks, but interested media can sign up now for early advice on opportunities, at europolismedia@gmail.com.

The EuroPolis project employs the Deliberative Polling® method, an approach invented by Professor James Fishkin at Stanford University that tries to put into practice the principle that democratic legitimacy rests on informed opinion, open deliberation, and equal participation of citizens.

The EuroPolis research team includes a wide range of international experts, not only from across the EU, but also from the US, where the deliberative polling method was pioneered.

The team has first-hand experience in conducting deliberative polls at the local, national and European level, in the UK, Denmark, Bulgaria, and Italy, as well as in the US, Asia and Australia. It includes some of the main contributors to the first wave of deliberative experiments conducted in 2006-2007 under the Plan D initiative.

The participating organisations are:

- the University of Siena – Circap, Italy;
- the University of Essex, United Kingdom;
- the University of Mannheim, Germany;
- Fondation Nationale des Sciences Politiques, France;
- University of Oslo, Arena, Norway;
- Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, Spain;
- European Policy Centre, Belgium;
- Avventura Urbana, Italy;
- TNS Opinion, Belgium;
- Median Research Centre, Romania