

EuroPolis proves that debate does change European citizens' attitudes

Brussels, June 3 2009: Informed discussion can change policy attitudes and votes. That is the unambiguous conclusion from the EuroPolis project in Deliberative Polling®, for which detailed results were released today.

Citizens can change their views on hot topics if they have the chance to discuss them – and in this project they became more European, more tolerant and greener in their views, the experiment has demonstrated. And contrary to some expectations, exposure to debate on immigration did not have the effect of intensifying support for anti-immigration parties.

The EuroPolis event last weekend demonstrated that when citizens have access to information and the opportunity to discuss and reflect, their attitudes can change. After three days of intensive exchanges in small groups and with experts and politicians, 350 citizens from across the EU frequently modified their positions on immigration, climate change and the EU itself.

- The discussions dramatically increased support for the Greens, from a vote share of 8% before to 18% afterwards. By contrast, the EPP share fell from 40% to 30%.
- Enthusiasm for measures to combat climate change increased from 49% to 61%, including stronger support for cutting harmful emissions – from 72% to 85%. Energy efficiency rose in popularity from 75% to 84%, and the use of an emissions trading system from 39% to 49%. At the same time, support for nuclear energy and biofuels declined.
- Citizens attached greater importance to immigration as an issue (an increase from 44% to 64% over the weekend), but became more supportive of rights for illegal immigrants. Support increased for providing them with access to health care and other services, while support diminished for tighter border controls, and for admitting immigrants by nationality or culture. The participants increased their support for penalising employers of illegal immigrants. These results were reflected even more dramatically among participants from Italy, where the immigration issue is particularly controversial.

Attitudes towards Europe and the EU also changed. Before the weekend,

- 37% of participants considered their country's membership of the EU to be "a very good thing", a figure that rose to 52%.
- 47% considered it their duty to vote in EU elections, a figure that rose to 56%.
- 72% thought of themselves "as just being from" their own country, a figure that fell sharply to 56%.

The results were presented in Brussels by Professor Pierangelo Isernia of Siena, the project leader, and Professor James Fishkin of Stanford and Professor Robert Luskin of the University of Texas at Austin and Stanford, leading exponents of Deliberative Polling®.

"If the European Parliament was elected by deliberating citizens, it would have a very different complexion", said Fishkin. "The European public sphere was brought to life for a weekend. And we showed it can make a difference in how people would vote".

“The results show that citizens’ attitudes to immigration – a particularly hot topic in Italy at present – become strikingly more tolerant when they are exposed to a wider range of influences”, said Isernia.

“In everyday life, most people do not know or think much about politics”, said Luskin. “The EuroPolis results show what EU citizens would think about immigration and climate change and how they would vote in the European Parliament elections if they knew, thought and talked much more about these issues”.

“They are becoming more tolerant – and the least tolerant are changing most”, said Professor David Sanders of the University of Essex, another of the research team.

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Notes for editors

EuroPolis brought together 350 European citizens to a conference centre just outside Brussels for intensive discussions on May 29-31. On their arrival on Friday, the participants all completed a questionnaire on immigration, climate change and the EU. On Sunday, after the event, they also completed a similar questionnaire just before their departure.

The three-day intensive EuroPolis seminar concluded on Sunday with a plenary session with 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.

EuroPolis organised this Deliberative Polling® experiment as part of its investigation into how far European democracy can be served by informed debate. The participants in the weekend event were selected from among more than 4,000 European citizens polled over recent weeks across the 27 member states for their views on immigration, climate change and the EU.

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 Cientificas, Spain; European Policy Centre, Belgium; Avventura Urbana, Italy; TNS Opinion, Belgium; Median Research Centre, Romania

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