

“This is why it was an extraordinary experiment”

A conversation with James Fishkin

Who has ever stared into the eyes of European public opinion? Who has ever listened to its voice?

“Thousands and thousands of words have been written about Europe’s public sphere, and there have been speculations and academic debates – says James Fishkin – but no one has ever actually observed or listened to European public opinion. At least until just a few days ago: all you need to do nowadays is type in the address of web site, click play on a video player and there it is in front of our eyes; there we hear its voice, the voice of European public opinion.”

We usually read in the papers, or see on television, that the French have rejected the Treaty, that the Poles are against a majority system rather than another, or that the English do not wish to adopt the Euro. But never until now have we been able to address European public opinion concretely, the voices of those who as European citizens debate the Union’s policies.

So let us follow Fishkin’s advice and visit the website entitled Tomorrow’s Europe (www.tomorrowseurope.eu) and let us start the film.

There they are; 362 people, normal citizens, a representative sample of the whole European population, of it subdivision according to nationalities, genders, cultures and income. The participants in this first ever pan-European deliberative poll[®] are there on the screens of our computers, and we can watch them as they exchange opinions, posing questions to politicians and experts within the hemicycle of the Brussels parliament, right there where the EU makes its decisions.

“All each person had to do, was choose the language in which they wished to listen and in which they wished to participate in the debate: 22 different languages used simultaneously, a scientifically selected European microcosm with technology allowing the European public sphere to become possible”.

Above all it allowed Fishkin’s invention to be made possible, his *deliberative poll*[®] that between October 12th and October 14th for the very first time saw this “microcosm”, as the American Professor likes to call it, providing a form for and giving life to the European public sphere.

Participants researched complex and demanding issues such as the EU’s role in policies addressing national welfare, the labour market within global economic competition, energy policies, the EU’s enlargement and the need for a shared foreign policy. They debated among themselves, divided into multi-language groups helped by the Parliament’s simultaneous translators and by moderators who managed the debates; they posed questions to politicians and economists and finally also expressed their own opinions.

“They addressed many difficult and controversial issues and subjects – continues Fishkin – but in spite of the complexity of the subjects addressed,

their knowledge of European issues improved significantly throughout this process”.

All the experience these European citizens returned home with after a weekend spent in Brussels was, according to their own statements, extremely precious and useful: “They found interesting, as well as balanced and impartial, the contents of the information provided to them; furthermore, they left the discussion groups with more respect for the ideas of others; one can see this in the manner in which they answered the final questionnaire, stating that even those who did not change their opinions had good reason to do so even if differing from their own”.

However, analysing in greater detail the data that emerged from the pan-European deliberative poll[®], one can observe how the positions assumed originally by participants showed a sort of rift between citizens from the 15 older member states of the EU and those coming from countries that recently joined the Union.

“For some of the questions – continues Fishkin – there was a change in opinion between the first answers and the final ones that ranged between 20 and 25%; these are really interesting figures; but what should be emphasised even more is the fact that at the end of this process, opinions expressed by people that were initially very distant ended up by becoming far closer”.

In particular, those favourable to rising retirement age increased from 26% to 40%; approval for further enlargement of the Union, although still positive, fell from 65 to 60%. The debate on this subject above all addressed possible membership of Turkey and the Ukraine. “It is interesting to observe – emphasises Fishkin – that among Europeans belonging to those countries who joined the EU recently there has been a significant changing of opinion against the entry of the Ukraine (from 78% approving this to 49%); and although there was a fall on those favourable to Turkey’s joining the EU (from 55% to 45%), it is important to know that this opposition is not based on religious reasons. In fact, the percentage of those considering that having a Muslim country as a member of the EU would render it excessively culturally inhomogeneous has remained more or less unchanged, falling from 43% to 41%”.

Why is it then that participants showed little approval for Turkey and the Ukraine joining the EU? “The idea of opposing the entry of such large and populated countries – answers Fishkin – arises above all from the persuasion that the enlargement of the Union is taking place too quickly, and that according to the participants, this slows down and causes problems for the Union’s entire decision making process”.

Hence one can observe that Europeans want a more determined Europe, capable of acting in depth and concretely on the world stage, but without this meaning a larger Union. Generally speaking, the participants showed that they wished for greater European commitment in specific fields such as an international market (52%), military intervention (65%), climate change

(83%), aid to foreign countries (71%), energy resources (59%) and diplomatic relations (63%).

"The European *deliberative poll*[®] – concludes Fishkin – brought the old and the new Europe together in the same room. One can observe how Europe, represented by a microcosm, can achieve reciprocal understanding and respect and how its citizens can address very complex and difficult issues with a degree of competence. Not only is a European public sphere possible, not only is this visible to us all, but it is also very useful and important to listen to what it has to say".

Mauro Buonocore