

Debate eases acceptance of EU reform

By Andrew Bounds in Brussels

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Europeans are prepared to accept liberal reforms when they are given a chance to debate them, a poll to be published on Thursday shows.

Participants in the first cross-border deliberative poll were far more likely to favour raising the retirement age or encouraging foreign investment and free trade after a weekend spent discussing the subjects with other citizens from across the European Union.

The poll, organised by Notre Europe, a French think-tank, and TNS-Sofres, a polling company, is encouraging for EU leaders who claim reform is needed but fear unpopularity if they pursue it.

As Jean-Claude Juncker, Luxembourg's premier, has noted: "We all know what we need to do but we don't know how to win elections after we have done it."

Stephen Boucher of Notre Europe said: "If you appeal to people's intelligence they do change their minds. It is possible to explain that reform is necessary.

"The idea was to get the London cab driver talking to the Marseilles dockworker."

After an initial poll of 3,500 people, a representative sample of 362 spent last weekend debating 59 questions with each other at the European parliament in Brussels.

The total favouring a longer working life rose from 26 per cent to 40 per cent after the sessions. Almost 60 per cent accepted that pension systems were heading for bankruptcy.

Support for foreign investment increased from 58.4 per cent to 69.3 per cent, with the biggest rise in the ex-communist "new" member states.

In almost all cases, the opinions of citizens from "old" and "new" states grew closer after talking to each other.

There was surprising solidarity on dealing with Moscow.

Concern over Europe's dependency on Russian energy rose from 81 per cent to 83 per cent while criticism of "Russian interference in the affairs of eastern European and central Asian countries" went from 65 to 74 per cent.

While 60 per cent favoured new members joining the EU, support for Turkey declined from 55 per cent to 45 per cent after deliberation. Ukraine only just mustered a majority after deliberation.

In a boost for the Commission, some 90 per cent of participants had a positive view of their country's EU membership.

People's knowledge of how the EU budget worked, what the parliament did and other issues shot up.

"That is long-lasting," said Mr Boucher. "People were prepared to spend a weekend discussing these 'boring' and technical issues."

The poll was paid for by the European Commission and private sponsors.

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