

# Polling that puts Europe in one room

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Imagine the citizens of Europe in one room discussing critical questions about their shared future in a common language. Sound impossible? Not so, according to communication Professor James Fishkin. He plans to carry out such an experiment this weekend in Brussels with the help of 400 people, from 27 countries, who form a scientifically representative sample of the European Union's 492 million residents.



This coming weekend, communication Professor James Fishkin will carry out Tomorrow's Europe, the most ambitious poll he has ever undertaken.

"We're going to put a sample of all of Europe in the parliament building where they can deliberate about key questions related to the future of Europe," said Fishkin, the Janet M. Peck Professor of International Communication. "A European-wide discussion at the mass level has never existed before. We will bring it into being for the first time in the history of the world."

Fishkin, the soft-spoken mastermind behind Deliberative Polling, conceived the trademarked methodology described as "polling with a human face" in 1988 when he was a fellow at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences. The political theorist has used the process more than 22 times in the United States, Canada, England, Australia, Denmark, Northern Ireland, Italy, Bulgaria, Greece and even the People's Republic of China. It is a process of public consultation in which a representative sample of people are polled before and after they have had a chance to deliberate targeted issues in an informed, objective manner.

"The resulting changes in opinion represent the conclusions the public would reach, if people had opportunity to become more informed and more engaged by the issues," Fishkin says on his website at the Stanford-based Center for Deliberative Democracy.

The EU-wide event, dubbed "Tomorrow's Europe," is the most ambitious poll Fishkin has undertaken; it involves 21 official EU languages and complicated far-flung logistics. The \$2.1 million project is supported by the European Commission; Allianz, Europe's largest insurance company; and other partners. The poll is scheduled to take place Oct. 12-14, on the eve of the EU Summit in Lisbon, where member states are expected to ratify a draft of a treaty intended to streamline decision-making in the expanding bloc, which has added 12 new member nations since 2004. The treaty replaces the EU's ill-fated attempt to pass a constitutional charter, which Dutch and French

voters rejected in 2005.

Tomorrow's Europe, which is being conducted by the European survey firm TNS Sofres, will focus on key issues concerning the EU's future—questions about economic and social welfare in an era of global competition and the union's broader role in the world. Results from the poll will be released in a special edition of BBC Newsnight in Lisbon Oct. 17, a day before the summit convenes. Other member states plan to send news teams as well and interview local participants before and after the poll. While results are not binding, they will provide "the people" an opportunity to express an informed opinion about their shared future. "In all the other polls we've done, I've found that people are very smart once you get them there [in one place]," Fishkin said. "If you can just get the attention and they talk to each other, they always come up with something that amazes me."

### **Tackling a 'democratic deficit'**

According to Fishkin, the EU has turned to deliberative polling to address a so-called "democratic deficit"—a perception of many Europeans that they cannot take part in EU-related debates because they are too complex and technical.

"At the moment, democratic strategies are caught between elite processes, like European constitutional conventions and parliaments on the one hand, and referendum democracy on the other," Fishkin said. "Is there a third way, which involves both participation and deliberation, both the voice of the people and the kind of thoughtful and informed weighing of trade-offs now found among elites?" A solution can be found "in the dust of history," Fishkin said. In ancient Athens, deliberative microcosms of citizens chosen at random made important public decisions. Now the professor wants to recreate this model in the European Parliament with the help of an army of simultaneous translators. "It sort of is a picture of what Europe could become—democracy at the mass level—if there was serious public dialogue across countries and people could understand each other," he said.

A lot of ground needs to be covered: An Oct. 2 poll by TNS Sofres revealed that only one of 10 Europeans has ever discussed EU matters with citizens from other countries. "I have had people say, 'Don't you know, the French only talk to the French, they don't talk to the Bulgarians,'" Fishkin said. "I said, 'Yes.' And they said, 'So, therefore, what are you doing?' And I said, 'That's the point. What would happen if they talked to each other?'"

Poll participants have been sent translated briefing materials, including background information on each of the issues to be discussed from the country level to the union as a whole. The documents, which have been reviewed by politically diverse members of the European Parliament, present possible policy suggestions, with arguments for and against each approach.

### **A pan-European public**

Making the poll representative of Europe as a single entity, rather than 27 countries, has provided its own set of challenges, Fishkin said. Participants are selected from each country in proportion to their national representation in the European Parliament. Citizens are randomly selected and then recruited with offers of free transportation to Brussels, four-star accommodation and a chance to

appear on television. On-the-ground logistics have created big headaches. Fishkin spent hours last week dealing with a postal strike in England just as rail tickets were mailed to participants. In Germany, a rail strike has been called for Oct. 11 and 12, just as participants are scheduled to arrive in Brussels. And Spain has a four-day holiday weekend coinciding with the poll, so all Sunday-evening flights from Brussels to Madrid have long been filled, making it difficult for Spaniards to return home. But Fishkin has persevered in his quest to find "typical" Europeans. "The people we want the most are the people who don't speak English, who have never been away from their village or town, who maybe have not thought much about the EU, because those are the people who help us make the sample representative of Europe as a whole," he said.

The only practical concession made in Tomorrow's Europe is that each deliberative group of 15 to 20 participants will share no more than five languages. Pivot languages will be used. For example, Bulgarian-to-Portuguese direct translation does not exist, a pivot language such as English will be used in between. "So for some languages, [communication] will be slightly delayed," Fishkin said. "But that's the problem of the EU. Can they all talk to each other and, if they talk to each other, can they understand each other?"

As Tomorrow's Europe gears up, Fishkin said he is thrilled that a representative sample of Europeans will deliberate inside the European Parliament building for the first time. "It's the hypothetical character of it that people find somewhat startling," he said. "But that makes it a possible exploration of a vision of Europe's future."

Based on past experience, Fishkin is confident his most ambitious experiment can succeed. "In every survey we've done, we've gotten the sample [of people] to show up, and they have understood each other," he said. "We have been able to show that the people have become more informed, and there is an increase in mutual respect and understanding." And return visits reveal long-term changes. "There is a tremendous amount of money spent on public opinion research to manipulate the public," he said. "We are trying to, thoughtfully, empower the public. It's a constructive way to use social science in the service of a vision of democracy in which people become informed and think for themselves rather than simply acquiescing to what political elites want to maneuver them toward. It's a picture of a different future."