

BY LISA TREI

Members of the European Union are cautious of admitting more countries and agree that their pension systems need reform, the first European-wide deliberative poll reveals.

"There was overwhelming agreement that enlargement has been too fast," said communication Professor James Fishkin, who organized the international poll Oct. 12-14 in Brussels. Since 2004, the EU has added 12 new members, creating a bloc of 27 nations with 492 million people.

"The population also is solicitous of their [respective] national sovereignty and not ready for qualified majority voting," Fishkin said, referring to the EU's move toward superceding the right of member countries to decide on key issues at the national level.

"There are caution flags going forward," he added. "There is a lot of hesitation from citizens. It is appropriate for elites to pay attention to that."

The representative sample of 362 Europeans who spent the weekend deliberating in the European Parliament on a series of hot-button topics were recruited from an initial random sample of 3,500 EU citizens in a poll conducted by the firm TNS-Sofres. Participants who took the initial survey were selected randomly by country in proportion to their representation in the EU parliament. The project, called "Tomorrow's Europe," was coordinated by the Paris-based think tank Notre Europe and sponsored by the European Commission, the insurance firm Allianz and other supporters.

According to Fishkin, director of the Center for Deliberative Democracy at Stanford, EU officials decided to try deliberative polling to confront the so-called "democratic deficit" in the region—a perception of many Europeans that they cannot participate in EU-related debates because they are too complex and technical. Deliberative polling, which Fishkin conceived in 1988, is a process of public consultation in which a representative sample of people are polled before and after they have had a chance to discuss targeted issues in an informed, objective manner. The Janet M. Peck Chair in International Communication, Fishkin has conducted more than 22 deliberative polls around the world on complex issues ranging from public-utility policies in Texas to the national referendum on the euro in Denmark.

Despite the challenge of working in 22 languages—participants communicated in their mother tongues with the help of translators—Fishkin deemed his latest and most complicated exercise a success. "The knowledge level went way up," he said about the deliberators. "We worked them tremendously hard and they loved it. A lot of people thought we couldn't do it and we did. We really did put Europe in one room where it could think about its future."

Key findings

Caution on EU enlargement

The percentage of participants agreeing that "additional countries that meet all the political and economic conditions for membership should be admitted to the EU" decreased from 65 to 60 percent after deliberation. Poll analysis suggests that, rather than having specific concerns about the accession of Turkey, participants were motivated by concerns that the EU has become too unwieldy. Before deliberating, 52 percent agreed that "adding more countries to the EU would make it more difficult for the EU to make decisions." After deliberating, the percentage jumped to 62 percent. Similarly, the percentage agreeing that the EU is "adding too many countries too fast" grew from 46 percent before to 53 percent after deliberation.

Pensions

Poll results revealed that many Europeans agree that their national pension systems need reform. Following deliberation, support for "raising the retirement age" jumped from 26 to 40 percent, and support for "making it attractive to work longer before retiring" rose from 57 to 70 percent. Meanwhile, the percentage agreeing that "keeping the retirement rules the way they are will bankrupt the retirement

system" increased from 50 to 59 percent.

EU's role in the world

The percentage of people who supported using military forces to "defend another EU country against military attack" rose from 80 to 83 percent after deliberation, while the percentage that supported military use "to prevent genocide in other countries" stayed roughly the same—sliding from 82 to 81 percent. On the other hand, support for using military force "to remove the threat of weapons of mass destruction" dropped from 70 to 59 percent. In addition, support for strengthening the power of one's own military dropped from 39 to 31 percent.

Significantly, poll results showed that there is increased concern about problems posed by Russia. Those expressing concern over "Europe's dependency on Russian energy supplies" rose from 81 to 83 percent, and over "Russian interference in the affairs of Eastern European and Central Asian countries" rose from 65 to 74 percent.

EU's role and qualified majority rule

Following deliberation, Fishkin explained, more participants supported the EU playing a greater decision-making role in several policy areas. These included foreign aid, in which support increased from 59 to 71 percent; energy supply, which rose from 52 to 59 percent; and diplomatic relations, which jumped from 56 to 63 percent.

Deliberation also produced important shifts on pension policies. The percentage of citizens who wanted the EU to play a broader role increased from 32 to 41 percent, while the percentage wanting members states to decide independently from the EU about pensions dropped from 54 to 46 percent.

Although these results demonstrate support for the EU playing a greater role in key policy areas, there was general opposition to instituting the changes through qualified majority rule. Following deliberation, participants showed they preferred unanimity rule to qualified majority rule on taxation (45 percent to 38 percent), social policy (44 percent to 39 percent), foreign policy (59 percent to 28 percent) and defense (65 percent to 24 percent). According to Fishkin, even if the participants supported the EU playing a greater role in certain areas, they remained protective of national sovereignty and were reluctant to impose union-wide decisions on dissenting states.

Old and new EU members

Opposition to further enlargement of the EU increased following deliberation, with new members making up a majority of the naysayers. Support from new EU members, most of which are from Eastern Europe, for the notion that "additional countries that meet all the political and economic conditions for membership should be admitted to the EU" dropped from 78 to 63 percent. Meanwhile, support from old EU members decreased 2 points, from 61 to 59 percent.

Discussion also spurred new members to regard the EU more favorably and identify themselves as Europeans. When asked if EU membership was a good thing, agreement among new member state participants jumped from 72 to 89 percent. Old member state participants also increased their support for the EU from 82 to 91 percent. New EU members thought of themselves as more European following deliberation, increasing from 69 to 87 percent, whereas old members increased 3 points from 81 to 84 percent.

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