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Greens get thumbs up in deliberative poll

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Following a weekend of debate ahead of the EU elections, over 350 citizens participating in the second pan-European deliberative poll have voiced growing support for the Greens, eroding the leadership of the two big European Parliament political groups, the centre-right EPP-ED and the Socialists.

Background:

Deliberative polling, a methodology developed by Professor James Fishkin of Stanford University in 1988, combines deliberation with scientific sampling to provide public consultation on policies and electoral issues.

The first pan-European deliberative poll, called [Tomorrow's Europe](#), was held in October 2009 in the framework of the EU's Plan D.

This second experiment, [Europolis](#), run by the University of Siena and its partners under the EU's 7th Framework Programme, comprised a scientific sample of EU voters, representing all 27-member states and focused on climate change and immigration.

The Europolis methodology followed the same pattern of other deliberative polls, developed by US professors James Fishkin and Robert Luskin. After a random representative sample of EU citizens was polled over the phone on the topics selected, a random sub-sample of 400 people was identified and invited to attend a deliberation event in Brussels.

Before arriving in Brussels, participants were sent briefing material which allowed them to lead informed discussions in both small groups and plenary sessions with political leaders. At the end of the deliberation, citizens were asked the original questions again.

The results reflect the change in opinion among the public after being given the chance to become more informed and engaged by policy issues. Deliberative poll experiments have been conducted around the world. In Europe, they have taken place in the UK, Denmark, Italy and Bulgaria.

"Serious deliberation on climate change significantly increased the electoral popularity of the Greens," James Fishkin, one of the fathers of the deliberative poll, said yesterday (3 June), releasing the results of the second Europe-wide deliberative poll (see background).

Gathered in La Hulpe, near Brussels, for a three-day weekend at the end of May, a scientifically-selected sample of 350 citizens from the 27 member states debated EU policies on immigration and climate change.

Confronted with conflicting arguments, they were able to express an informed opinion and not just give an off-the-cuff response, as often happens in conventional polls.

"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 vote," he added.

Europolis sharply increased support for the Greens, whose share of the vote jumped from 8% before to 18% after deliberation. The European People's Party (EPP) gathered the most support in the initial phase of the poll with a 40% vote share, but later plunged to 30%. The other political parties posted minor losses: the Party of European Socialists (PES) fell from 22 to 21%, while the Liberal Democrats (ALDE) dropped from 9 to 8%.

Contesting the view among policymakers that stringent policy measures to combat global warming would be poorly received by public opinion, the poll shows enthusiasm for action to reduce harmful greenhouse gas emissions, which received the backing of 85% of respondents compared to an initial 72%.

Energy efficiency also rose in popularity from 75 to 84% and the use of an emissions trading scheme (ETS) soared from 39 to 49%. At the same time, support for nuclear energy and biofuels decreased.

"If campaigners informed people the way we did, they will see a change in their opinions," added Fishkin, referring to election

campaigns across Europe. "Unfortunately, people are always shown one argument, but not the other," he argued, saying deliberative polls give citizens balanced information, which allows them to evaluate a wide range of trade-offs before they make up their mind on policy options.

Citizens also showed a greater understanding and tolerance of immigration issues after deliberation. Before discussions with policymakers and experts, 69% of participants believed immigrants should be committed to the host country's way of life, while only 52% did so at the end of the process.

Comparable but smaller falls were also shown in the importance of coming from a similar culture (from 25 to 17%) and in being Christian (13 to 19%).

Even though previous national deliberative polls have been [broadcast in national TV](#) to better bridge the chasm between electors and the elected, both pan-European deliberative polls did not engage larger audiences by airing the event live on TV.

According to Fishkin, Europolis was organised as a scientific rather than a communication event. Europe, he said, is an especially difficult place with different languages and different markets. "There is no common public sphere, because of the lack of a same communication system," he concluded, noting the lack of funding for boosting communication.

Links

Think tanks & Academia

- Europolis: [Europolis proves that debate does change European citizens' attitude](#)
- Europolis [Homepage](#)
- Tomorrow's Europe [Homepage](#)
- Center for Deliberative Democracy (Stanford University) [Homepage](#)