Campaigning for Europe

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(19) How opinions become a vote
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Speaker: Professor Sara Hobolt (Sutherland Chair of European institutions at the London School of Economics and Political Science) and Stuart Hand (former Deputy Director for the UK Conservative Party, a grassroots campaign expert with over 20 years of experience)

Moderator: Phillip Schulmeister (Head of the Public Opinion Unit at the Directorate-General for Communication, European Parliament)

The aim of the workshop was to understand how opinions become votes and how this knowledge can be used, taking into account Eurobarometer data. Based on 40 years of academic research, the Eurobarometer provides high quality representative post-electoral statistics. Its data can be used to increase the effectiveness of future campaigns.

Professor Sara Hobolt opened her introductory statement by asking: "Are opinions the mechanisms that move people to vote? Are the EU elections a chance to show the unhappiness of the people?" She went on to state that the biggest problem was perhaps the lack of opinions.

Next, Ms Hobolt introduced the main academic findings on the European elections. Firstly, these were often viewed as "second order national elections", meaning that vote choices were based on domestic concerns rather than European issues. National elections generally had higher turnouts, and the main problems at EU level were low visibility and low participation. However, Hobolt anticipated that things were changing in the run-up to the 2019 elections, as attitudes towards Europe was more likely to be a determining factor behind voter choices. A principle factor in voter participation was polarisation on the political spectrum. This was particularly the case in some EU Member States. Polarised countries tended to have a much higher turnout and national parties played a major role in mobilising people.

Similar to national elections, the citizens voting tended to be from older generations and well-educated. Strong feelings for or against the EU did not guarantee greater participation in the elections, Hobolt explained. Furthermore, the elections were also used as a protest, with the aim of punishing national governments and voting against the establishment (including the EU). As the voters were less concerned about the election results, small opposition parties generally performed better in EU elections.

Phillip Schulmeister, head of the Public Opinion Unit, agreed that there was a lack of interest in the European elections, but that due to the financial crisis, people had seen that the decisions made in Brussels could have a direct impact on their lives. "If I don't connect with you about something you don't care about, you will not feel motivated to vote during the elections", Schulmeister claimed. He showed a graph demonstrating that 68% of EU citizens believed that their country had benefited from EU membership. He explained, however, that this was the average figure for the EU and that opinions varied considerably between the Member States.

Mr Schulmeister went on to state that opinions differed across generations. Older citizens tended to like the EU more, were the most interested group and were well informed about the upcoming elections. Level of education and profession also made a difference. People who had finished their education in their twenties or who were still studying tended to be more interested than those who had left their studies earlier. Referring to different professions, unemployed people were those who were least interested. Groups with a higher level of interest included managers, self-employed citizens and white-collar workers.

As people and opinions varied, Schulmeister affirmed that the campaign should have specific targets and not necessarily target everyone together. He believed that the campaign should focus on those who were pro-European. "There are people I don't need to talk with. They are not my target. There is not point spending a lot of time and money on people who do not believe in the EU", he stated.
He then explained that a campaign consisted of three steps. Firstly, it was necessary to identify citizens with an open attitude towards the EU and to know how many of them there were and where they were located. The second step was to locate the soft abstainers and find out when and why they abstained from voting. Only after doing this should campaign organisers begin fine-tuning the priorities, values and subject of the campaign.

Former Deputy Director for the UK Conservative Party Stuart Hand then took the floor. He agreed that the main target of the European elections campaign should be pro-European groups. This had been one of the lessons learned from the Brexit referendum: "We built a campaign that was statistically proven to be the best, but we did the wrong things in the wrong place. The campaign should have been focused on specific voters. That's the key to successful communication".

Mr Hand advocated focusing the campaign on local communities and adapting it to local situations. Moreover, in order for people to join the campaign it needed both an online and an offline movement. An example of this would be a local community meeting that was organised through social media. For Mr Hand, Eurobarometer data was useful at the beginning of the campaign, as it showed which campaign activities should be used.

In the second half of the session, the floor was opened up for questions from the audience. One question was why linear data was used for the campaign even though there were more variables? Schulmeister explained that as data was not static and changed constantly, the results were updated regularly. Although the Eurobarometer was "not a bible", it could help to understand certain phenomena. A question raised on the anti-European movements in countries such as the Czech Republic or Poland was: "Is there any help from the EU to increase the visibility of EU ideals in these countries?". Schulmeister pointed out that there were differences between public discourse and public opinion. He stated that EU communicators were on the ground as much as possible given resource limitations. Another question from the audience addressed the lack of emotion in campaigns, explaining that an emotional video during a concert had made a real impact and arguing that the campaign should follow this example. Mr Hand agreed, stating that: "The most important

messages are personal stories and the way in which they are communicated. There is an emotional factor in this campaign: This time voting is like an umbrella, so there are many possibilities", he explained.

The final take away of the session: **Trust the data, use the data consistently and respect your target group!**