

### **Faking Public Opinion: how Viviane Reding abuses opinion polls for her own purpose**

Viviane Reding, EU Commissioner for Justice, Fundamental Rights and Citizenship, told German media that she is willing to go to the extreme. She has a mission. Reding, once a journalist with *Luxemburger Wort*, is eager to push more women onto the boards of publicly-listed companies. Viviane Reding thinks equality has to be equality in outcome, that is, she wants to dictate to publicly-listed firms the share of women they will have to have in their boardrooms. This isn't a matter of diversity in boardrooms – as it's usually described – it's a plain and simple matter of exerting coercion in order to get what one wants.

However Reding isn't acting on her own, or even with an egocentric agenda. Quite the contrary; she claims to be the frontrunner for European Citizens. Three out of four Europeans, she claims, agree that it should be legally binding for firms to provide women with opportunities equal to men – given equal capabilities – when it comes to appointing members of boards of directors. She learned that from the European Unions survey branch, the Eurobarometer unit, which specialises in asking Europeans questions about the European Union, and questions about almost everything they can think of.

How times change. Some while ago politicians used to lay everything they did on the doorsteps of voters, claiming it was voters' wills and orders they were eager to carry out. Nowadays legitimisation of politics is no longer a matter of voters' wills and orders. Nowadays political Commissioners like Viviane Reding refer to opinion polls, claiming that they get their mission from asking, for example, 'Europeans'. However, opinion polls tend to produce results which are contrary to the use that Commissioners such as Viviane Reding have in mind. Therefore opinion polls need to be crafted, so that in the end they produce the results Commissioners wish for. In this post, I shall show how Viviane Reding is trying to fool the public and to fake public opinion.

After the Second World War survey research came to Europe. It built upon extensive work done by the likes of Paul F. Lazarsfeld or Bernard Berelson, both scientists, who took great pride in the instrument they had developed. Through standardised questionnaires they were able to sample thousands of interviews, using them as building blocks for scientific theories and providing evidence backing their newly-built theories. However, in order to do so, questioning had to be sound. This is why they developed a sophisticated methodology that should guarantee or at least secure reliable and valid results, which should prevent interviewees from saying what they thought interviewers would like them to say, and which would prevent interviewers from suggesting correct answers to interviewees, respectively. The combination of sound method and standardised procedures is one of the cornerstones responsible for the success which survey research has had over past decades.

However, survey research isn't just a tool to back up or test theories, it's not just a tool for sampling 'public opinion', it's also a mighty tool if you want to manipulate and guide people to give correct answers, so that you may use them, base your own ideas on them, and claim that this is not your opinion but what, say, 1000 interviewees agreed upon. This potential for abuse for misguiding interviewees unnerved a number of scientists. To calm their fears they developed safeguards to prevent opinion polls from being misused. Accordingly, manipulations of the following kind were deemed breaches of the scientific method in general, and of survey research standards in particular:

- directing the thoughts of interviewees, suggesting correct answers;
- withholding of obvious alternatives to answer a particular standardised question;
- including contradictory questions at different places in the questionnaire, to enable choosing the ‘correct’ one.

Viviane Reding based her claim that Europeans want publicly-listed companies to be forced to adopt quotas for women in their boardrooms on a special Eurobarometer survey designed to ask Europeans about their opinions about ‘Women in decision-making positions’. I suppose it was the General Directorate of Viviane Reding which paid for this survey and, because it paid the bill, it rigged the results. The Eurobarometer in question contradicts every single one of the three above mentioned standards. I conclude that the survey was designed to produce predetermined results.

*Manipulation toolbox first trickery: how to make sure interviewees give the answer you want*

One of the central questions Europeans were asked in Eurobarometer 376 about ‘Women in decision-making positions’ was the following:

‘At the present time, in the EU, women are less likely than men to hold positions of responsibility. Please tell me whether you agree or disagree with each of the following statements on this subject.’

This kind of subtle guidance is rather ingenious. Whoever came up with this question wording is a master of his (or her?) craft. Observe how a simple ‘at present’ insinuates to interviewees a state in transition. It highlights something that is already changing or needs a push to change in the right direction. To see the manipulation behind this question wording it is quite useful to transfer the ‘At the present time’ to another context. So what about the following: ‘At the present time, men are less likely than women to reach the age of 70’, or ‘At the present time, too much fish is harvested of the North Sea’, or ‘At the present time, Germans export more to Britain than they import from Britain’, or ‘At the present time, fewer people can watch a game at White Hart Lane than at the Emirates’. Now, suppose you want to know if people object to funding more research in order to increase men’s life expectancy, if they are in favour of a fishing quota in the North Sea, if they would like to put a tax on German imports, or would like to give Tottenham ownership of the Olympic Stadium? What would be the most likely result? This is how subtle manipulation works. It’s a well-known phenomenon, it’s useful for manipulators, but it says nothing about the attitudes of those interviewed.

*Manipulation toolbox second trickery: ask questions and avoid obvious answers*

The question wording cited above is the introductory text to a so-called item list. Interviewees are required to give for each item in the list their assessment as to whether or not they are in favour. Five items follow this introductory text. They state reasons as to why in boardrooms women may not be equal in numbers to men. What is impressive with the items listed is not what is listed, but what is lacking, for example:

- women don’t strive for senior positions in companies to the same extent as men;

- women want to take care of their families rather than becoming board directors;
- many women don't want to sacrifice time they could spend with their family to build their careers;
- many women work part-time and hence they are not available for promotion.

Not one of these items can be found in the list provided in Eurobarometer 376. This is astonishing. It is astonishing because the importance of items like the ones presented for the explanation of women's career choices are well-known facts in the social science community. Catherine Hakim (e.g. 1991) has written extensively about the fact that only a minority of women is willing to build a working career, while a majority strive for careers as housewives or is undecided (which could be seen as a result of the Prince of Persia not having proposed, yet).

*Manipulation toolbox third trickery: contradictory question wordings*

My favourite among the trickeries deployed in Eurobarometer 376 is the quite common habit to ask interviewees at different times in the interview two modified versions of questions which contradict each other. This, if done well, reaps the benefit of being able to use the distribution of answers which best suits your needs. Eurobarometer 376, the implicit aim of which is to find support amongst Europeans for legally-binding boardroom quotas for women, includes the following questions:

[QE4.1] 'What is, in your view, the best way to achieve a more balanced representation of men and women on company boards: (1) Voluntary measures such as non-binding Corporate Governance Codes and Charters; (2) Self-regulation by companies setting their own targets; (3) Binding legal measures; (4) There is no need to achieve a more balanced representation of men and women on company boards.'

Following this question is this one:

[QE5] 'Some European countries (e.g. France, Spain, the Netherlands, Italy, Belgium and Norway) have already taken legal measures to ensure a more balanced representation of men and women on company boards. Are you in favour or opposed to legislation on this matter under the condition that qualification is taken into account without automatically favouring one of either gender?'

[QE4.1] produces the following results: 26% of interviewees agree to 'binding legal measures', 51% favour one of the two voluntary measures, while 8% see no reason to do anything about the topic, and 15% don't know what to say. In other words, in [QE4.1] about 59% don't see any necessity to put legally binding measures into place. This, obviously, is not the answer Viviane Reding was hoping for. But there is still question [QE5]. Question [QE5] is not a question for which interviewees are prompted to agree or disagree, they're prompted to tell whether they are totally or somewhat in favour, or totally or somewhat opposed. This time 37% of interviewees say that they are totally in favour of legal binding measures, while 38% state that they are somewhat in favour.

Now, if you would want to claim that Europeans are in favour of legally binding measures to force women quotas upon publicly-listed companies, the results of which one of the two questions would you report, and which one would you omit? Well, that is exactly what Viviane Reding did. Moreover she claimed that 75% of Europeans are in favour of legally-binding measures to enforce women quotas in the boardroom. To gain 75% she simply added those 'somewhat' in favour to those 'totally' in favour. Who cares for the 'slight' difference between 'totally' and 'somewhat'? If you want to fool the public and falsely claim public opinion on your side, you can't afford to be choosy, can you?

This blatant manipulation of survey results, and the fact that Eurobarometer surveys are used nowadays for manipulation rather than scientific research, is a slap in the face to social researchers who try their best to provide sound evidence, and do their utmost to avoid pushing interviewees in any direction, and it is ghoulish behaviour against men like Karl-Heinz Reif who tried to establish the Eurobarometer as an information source, not a tool of manipulation. However, questions in Eurobarometer surveys are paid for, so whenever the General Directorate of the EU thinks it has a point to prove, or it lacks empirical backing, it can tailor Eurobarometer questions and interpret the results to suit its agenda. If you're invited to become an interviewee for one of the next Eurobarometer surveys, I recommend that you refuse to be one, because your answers will be used against you.