

HOW TO ENGAGE

How can your organisation/your members engage in the run up to the European elections 2009? We have brainstormed and collected ideas for you to get started. These are ideas described in a general way. You will need to adapt them to the context you are working in. We are interested to learn from your experience. Please share your good experiences with us by sending an email to: coordinator@act4europe.org

Inform your members, supporters and partners about the European elections

- Post the EU Civil Society Contact Group European elections action/fact sheets on your website (should you translate one or several of our action/ fact sheets, please share the translation with us, we will make them available online)
- Post other information on the European Parliament, the elections and the candidates on your website
- Include information regularly in your newsletter about the European Parliament elections from now on until June 2009
- Open a blog on the EU elections
- As part of your newsletter/website, collect questions from your constituency to candidates and invite the candidates to respond in written form

Organise a brainstorming session with your members

Invite your members/supporters to a meeting on the European Parliament and the 2009 elections. Start with collecting what participants already know about the European Parliament. You can then give a short presentation on the European Parliament's role and powers (you can use Fact sheet 4). Then brainstorm (probably in smaller groups) on questions such as:

- Why should we go to vote in the European elections?
- What experiences/record do we want our European Parliamentarian(s) to have? What questions could we ask candidates? What do we want candidates to know about our ideas for Europe?
- How can we further engage in the run up to the elections in June 2009?

Only organise such a brainstorming session if you have the capacity to follow it up. As you are creating ideas for activities, try at the end of the meeting to agree on what activities should come next and share out the work involved.

Get to know the parties' manifestos

Get in touch with the parties. They will all have manifestos that reflect their views on European integration and their priorities. Skim them and compare them to your own visions and claims. It can also be interesting to look at the manifestos of the European Parliamentary Groups of which the national parties are members (Fact sheet 4 includes links to the Groups). This can be done in a group including your members/supporters. If this is not possible, the staff/volunteers of your organisations can do it and you can then make your analysis available to your constituency.

Get to know the candidates

Research the profile of candidates and make the information available to your constituency. You can prepare a master with criteria you want to check (e.g. knowledge of civil society, political priorities, and political experience). You can also develop a questionnaire, send it to candidates and map them according to their responses.

Write to candidates

Due to the high number of candidates it will be impossible to write individually to all of them. You could concentrate on those candidates who are on the top of the lists and have the biggest chances of being elected. However, these candidates are not always the most approachable.

- Make sure that the letters are short and concise – the average politician is rarely keen on reading many pages. But be able to provide more information for those that show interest.
- You can find in Action sheet 3 the major concerns of the eight civil society sectors represented in the EU Civil Society Contact Group. Use them for inspiration.
- Do not forget to point out that civil society actors become more significant in the European political process. We represent many organized citizens and elected representatives cannot simply ignore our views. The EU is very keen on bringing the European project closer to its citizens. And that is where civil society can play a major role. So when you address the candidates remind them of the importance of civil society representing the concerns of huge constituencies and of the need to bring the European project closer to its citizens.
- Make clear in the letter that you expect a reaction from the addressee. After a week or two call them. Every reaction can be used later on to establish contact for the next 5 years - and to remind them of their promises.

You can also draft a template letter to candidates and invite your members to use it to contact candidates directly.

Good practice: *Send holiday wishes to the candidates*

Zagranica Group- Polish NGOs Abroad

In late October 2007, there was a parliamentary election in Poland and so by the end of the year a new cabinet and new Parliament were in place. Since the Zagranica Group is a platform of NGOs working abroad for relief, development and democracy assistance, it is in working contact with the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Sejm (Polish Lower Chamber). In mid-December Zagranica wrote a short 'welcome letter' to all the members of this Committee, congratulating them and wishing them a fruitful period in office, sending season's greetings and attaching their aid watch report with brief information about who we are and what we do.

Christmas and New Year seem to be a perfect occasion to send such an info package using season's greetings as a pretext for contacting them. It can be a postcard with the logo or a recent publication. www.zagranica.org.pl

Meet with candidates

A good way of creating lasting contacts is a meeting between a small delegation of your organisation and candidates before the election. If you have succeeded in organizing a meeting

- identify key issues for discussion
- find out about the topics the candidate is/might be most interested in
- be realistic on how much you can cover in one meeting
- be clear and concise about your claims (don't let them side-track you away from your concerns)
- You might make suggestions to those who are open and supportive of your work about the kind of committees you would like to see them in. For this, it is important to familiarize yourself sufficiently with how the European Parliament works or to get information from your relevant EU networks on what they advise.

Some candidates might not be familiar with the role civil society can/should play in European politics or with the possibilities of acting in favour of your issues. A meeting can help to raise his/her awareness.

Organise panel discussions with candidates from different parties

Organising round tables with a few candidates of your country/your constituency can be very interesting and gives the candidates and the public the opportunity to discuss. Due to the poor turnouts at the last elections the candidates are likely to be open to taking part in such events. They will consider them a good way of getting in touch with the electorate.

- Join forces with other partners (NGOs, trade unions, community organisations, faith groups) to prepare such a hearing and to ensure that your members/citizens get involved.
- Present briefly your concerns/claims (you can use Action sheet 3 as a basis) and give the parliamentarians the possibility to talk about their priorities.
- Be creative about the format: organise a “Discuss PUB-lic” (see box below), organise a brunch at the community centre, have candidates join you for coffee at the local market

Make sure that your members get active and interested in these meetings. Both candidates and electorate will find this contact useful: the politicians can spread their “visions”, and your members can highlight their concerns and test whether the candidates represent them. You can collect questions beforehand from your members (by e-mail/on website/in a meeting) and invite the candidates to respond to these questions.

Good practice: *Streitcafé - Discuss PUB-lic*

Deutscher Naturschutzring DNR – German Federation of Environmental NGOs

The Deutscher Naturschutzring DNR (German Federation of Environmental NGOs) for the 2004 European elections developed the concept of “Discuss PUB-lic”. Young candidates, nominated from main parties for the EP elections, were invited to an evening event in a hip pub or bar. The candidates, representatives from NGOs, industry and the EU Commission discussed the future of the European Union with regard to its Environment and Sustainable Development Policy. After the discussion citizens had the possibility of drinking a “sustainable cocktail” with the invited panellists for a further talk. Additionally a DJ was invited to play dancing records later on. The feedback from participants was very good and the DNR evaluated the project as a success.

Raise media interest

Events with candidates can also be an important tool in attracting media attention. In most countries the media confines itself to reflecting a pessimistic view on European integration or to complaining about Brussels’ bureaucracy. One can be sceptical about European integration – but the Parliament plays a major role and it makes no sense to contribute to citizens’ indifference towards elections. A candidates’ event combined with press releases on civil society’s major concerns may emphasize European issues that are usually never reported, such as minority rights or environmental issues, and additionally transmit a “positive” signal about the importance of elections (without necessarily being Euro-enthusiastic at the same time). You can also write articles for the local media to raise awareness about the importance of the elections.

Raise awareness in public space

Develop a leaflet/postcard on the European elections and distribute it in the street, local market or by going from door to door. This can be a way of mobilising voters and at the same time raising awareness about the elections as such but also about your concerns. This might also be a way of inviting people to participate in an event you are organising with candidates.

Good practice: Awareness raising postcard European Women's Lobby EWL



The EWL secretariat before the European Parliament elections 2004 prepared the above postcard. It was then translated by members of EWL into a number of languages. It was disseminated to EWL member organizations and put at the disposal of the public in meetings so that members and other individuals could send them to national political parties. The visual on the postcard and accompanying poster aimed at raising awareness about the under representation of women in the European Parliament. The activity was appreciated by EWL members because it gave individuals the possibility to engage easily.