

Research impact: making a difference

Making EU policymaking accessible and transparent

A website that reports on EU voting and policymaking has become a vital tool for journalists, NGOs and EU citizens

What was the problem?

The European Union (EU) grew rapidly over the past decade. Since 2004 it added 10 new member states, with five countries – Slovenia, Malta, Cyprus, Slovakia and Estonia – taking the further step of joining the common currency. This increasing size and complexity brought challenges for EU citizens in tracking developments and understanding the policy positions and voting records of the individual member governments and their representatives.

In particular, citizens expressed growing discontent with the lack of information regarding when, how and by whom EU policies were adopted. Their concerns were primarily directed at the two main EU legislative bodies: the European Parliament, which is elected by EU citizens to represent them, and the Council of the European Union, which represents the member governments.

What did we do?

In 2009 an international group of researchers specialising in EU politics conceived a new initiative called VoteWatch Europe, which was deliberately designed to address this need for greater transparency of voting and policymaking in the European Parliament and the Council of the European Union.

VoteWatch Europe was largely built upon the research of its co-founders. At LSE these were Sara Hagemann, Assistant Professor in LSE's European Institute, and Simon Hix, Harold Laski Professor of Political Science in LSE's Government Department. Hagemann's research interests included EU bargaining and issues of representation and transparency in EU politics, in particular with regards to negotiations and voting in the EU Council, while Hix had a long and distinguished publication record in the area of EU legislative politics, with a particular focus on voting behaviour in the European Parliament. Other VoteWatch co-founders included Associate Professor of Political Economy Abdul Noury at New York University and Doru Frantescu, then at the Institute for Public Policy in Romania (and now Director of VoteWatch).

Building upon the data and the analytical insights from the research of these four founders, VoteWatch Europe launched a website, www.votewatch.eu, to report on EU legislators' political activities. The website included detailed information regarding individual governments' policy positions, coalition trends across policy areas, and the working groups involved in preparation of legislative proposals.

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VoteWatch Europe tracked all elected Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) and the decisions they adopted. It provided users with critical information about the national and European political groups to which each MEP belonged and the coalitions that were formed between political parties in various policy areas.

The VoteWatch Europe website was continuously updated to reflect every vote taken in meetings of the Council of the European Union and the European Parliament plenary, and reported the results only a few hours after a vote had taken place. The website presented the information in a format that enabled key stakeholders – the media, citizen organisations, NGOs and individuals – to monitor how MEPs and governments had positioned themselves more generally in the different EU policy areas and more specifically on individual pieces of legislation.

VoteWatch Europe was officially hosted by the European Institute at LSE. A registered office was also established in Brussels, supported by an information technology team based in Bucharest. Hagemann served as Executive Director of VoteWatch from its founding until November 2011, when Michiel van Hulten, a former Dutch MP and former MEP, succeeded her.

What happened?

VoteWatch Europe was found to have a direct and significant impact on activities in the European Parliament and the Council of the European Union.

During parliamentary elections in 2009, three MEPs ultimately lost their seats following unsuccessful attempts to justify their voting records after these records were reported in detail on VoteWatch. Journalists paid similar attention to the MEPs' voting records during elections in 2014.

Following VoteWatch Europe criticism of transparency practices in both the Council and the Parliament, both institutions invited the VoteWatch Europe team to participate in public hearings and internal meetings on the subject. In the Council, the Secretariat discussed and acted upon VoteWatch Europe's proposals for more transparent reporting of EU legislative decisions by making more information on member state positions public ahead of ministerial meetings. In the Parliament, VoteWatch Europe proposals were discussed in its ruling body and in the full plenary.

The European Parliament's website, the official website for the rotating EU presidencies, as well as several national governments' websites, were also linked to VoteWatch.eu, attesting to its role as a reliable and accurate source of information for EU citizens, officials, and the decision-makers themselves. A number of online media placed permanent links to VoteWatch.eu on their own sites in the run-up to the European elections in 2014, including the BBC, Euractiv and EUObserver.

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To make VoteWatch Europe reporting more interactive, a tool called VoteMatch was launched, which enabled citizens to vote on the same issues as those that decision-makers were presented with in the Council and the Parliament plenary.

VoteWatch Europe also engaged in collaborative research projects with 20 national think tanks to analyse EU voting, working across 24 languages and reaching more than 10 million people via reports and media coverage.

In 2010 the impact of VoteWatch activities was given formal recognition at both the Personal Democracy Forum in Barcelona and the World E-Democracy Forum in Paris, where it was lauded as an example of best practice for using e-democracy tools to hold politicians accountable. In 2014 it received further recognition when it was shortlisted for NGO of the Year in the European Public Affairs Awards.

VoteWatch continues to be viewed as a leading source of information on EU voting and policymaking. The website has more than 30,000 users, and more than 400 reporters have been receiving its automated newsfeeds and monthly summaries of legislative proceedings.

International businesses and trade unions have also made use of VoteWatch Europe's research and analysis, including the European Trade Institute, Barclays, Amgen, PriceWaterhouseCoopers, and the Confederation of British Industry.

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