

The debates between candidates for Commission President have a long way to go if they are to generate real engagement with EU citizens

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*One of the key innovations in the 2014 European Parliament election campaign has been the inclusion of televised debates between candidates for the next President of the European Commission. **Nick Anstead** assesses the debates which have taken place so far. He writes that while televised debates are a good option for improving citizen engagement with the campaign, the discussions so far have suffered from the limited expression of Eurosceptic views and a lack of genuinely representative audiences.*



Televised debates seem to be all the rage now. In 2010, the UK had its first ever televised leadership discussion. These three broadcasts did a huge amount to shape the tone, content and possibly the outcome of the election campaign. Then in March and April this year, Nick Clegg and Nigel Farage featured in two [head-to-head](#) broadcasts on the topic of whether the UK should be in or out of the European Union.

However, perhaps the strangest manifestation of the televised debate format took place in Maastricht on 28 April, when four of the five would-be new Presidents of the European Commission engaged in an hour and a half long [discussion](#) for the broadcaster Euronews. This was followed up by further debates, most recently on 9 May. These were unprecedented events: no such debates had ever occurred before.

Superficially, there is something attractive about this development. Media events of this kind can educate citizens, or even provide forums where they can participate in political discussion. They can also build bridges between the political class and voters. Certainly, these hopes were reflected in the discourse surrounding the debate on Euronews, subtitled *Europe's Choice*, and described by the moderators as "History being made" and as a moment when "You the audience at home... are going to be asking the questions".



Jean-Claude Juncker, Credit: European People's Party (CC-BY-SA-3.0)

This rhetoric is interesting for two reasons. First, because it suggests that televised debates (much like the internet and new media) are being thought of as a "magic bullet", capable of reconnecting the political class with disaffected and uninterested voters. This would certainly seem to be the hope in European Parliamentary elections, where turnout has [dropped](#) from 62 per cent in 1979 to 43 per cent in 2009.

There is also an institutional backdrop to this media development. [The Treaty of Lisbon](#) specifies a new method for the selection of the Commission President, giving – in theory at least – the European Parliament and the parties within it a far greater say in who succeeds José Manuel Barroso as the next President of the European Commission.

The Treaty states that the European Council must take into account the results of the European Parliamentary

elections in selecting the new Commission President. This selection will also require subsequent ratification by a majority of the parliament. Party groupings within the parliament have reacted to this development by using various mechanisms to nominate “Spitzenkandidat” (literally: leading candidate). These individuals, the parties argue, are their candidates for the Commission Presidency, essentially equivalent to party leaders in a parliamentary system.

However, it is very unclear how this process will work in practice. In particular, what does taking into account the results of the parliamentary election mean? Does it mean that the Spitzenkandidat from the largest party should automatically be nominated by the European Council? Alternatively, should the vote only be the starting point for a conversation, which broadens and allows new compromise candidates to emerge? The answer is that no one really knows how events will play out after the election.

There are additional quirks in the system. In the UK, for example (and as reported recently in [The Guardian](#)), no one will have the opportunity to vote directly for the leading candidate for the Presidency, Jean-Claude Juncker. This is because he represents the European People’s Party, which the Conservatives left in 2009. Labour has also [declined](#) to explicitly support the candidate for the Party of European Socialists, Martin Schultz, going as far as to discourage him from visiting Britain to campaign.

These confusions and ambiguities led to one of the major short-comings of the first televised debate from a democratic engagement perspective. Despite all the rhetoric of inclusion and citizens having their say, at no point in the 90 minute long programme was any explanation offered as to how the election process would work and what role voters could play. Explaining the unknowns of the system would have superficially watered down the democratic rhetoric of the broadcast, yet ensuring transparency and educating potential voters in institutional complexity is part of a real and messy business of democracy.

The broadcast suffered another major problem as an attempt to create legitimacy for the European elections and other institutions. In the United States and many countries where televised debates are common, it is normal practice for broadcasters to work with pollsters to construct an audience which is broadly representative of the electorate, both in terms of party preference and socio-demographic characteristics. No attempt had been made to do this. Instead the audience was made up of students from the University of Maastricht.

This problem was further reflected in the discussion around the rise of Euroscepticism in the debate (31 minutes into the [Youtube video](#)). Recent polls have suggested that Eurosceptic parties might [claim](#) up to a quarter of the vote in the upcoming election. This issue was raised in the debate, but the question and responses were framed very much in the context of the “otherness” of Eurosceptic ideology. Put another way, the assumption seemed to be that everyone in the audience – either in the auditorium itself or watching at home – shared broadly the same set of views. No attempt was made to communicate directly with the one-in-four European citizens who might vote for parties offering a different worldview.

In truth, this issue reflects a much longer term concern about the European project. In order to work and generate legitimacy, political institutions require cultural and social foundations. Citizens need a sense of forming a public with a shared identity and interests. This is exactly what the European Union lacks. Televised debates and mediated politics more generally can certainly enhance democracy, but only when they reflect an underlying reality of common association. Without that, they run the risk of appearing hollow and far removed from the reality of citizen’s worldviews.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

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