

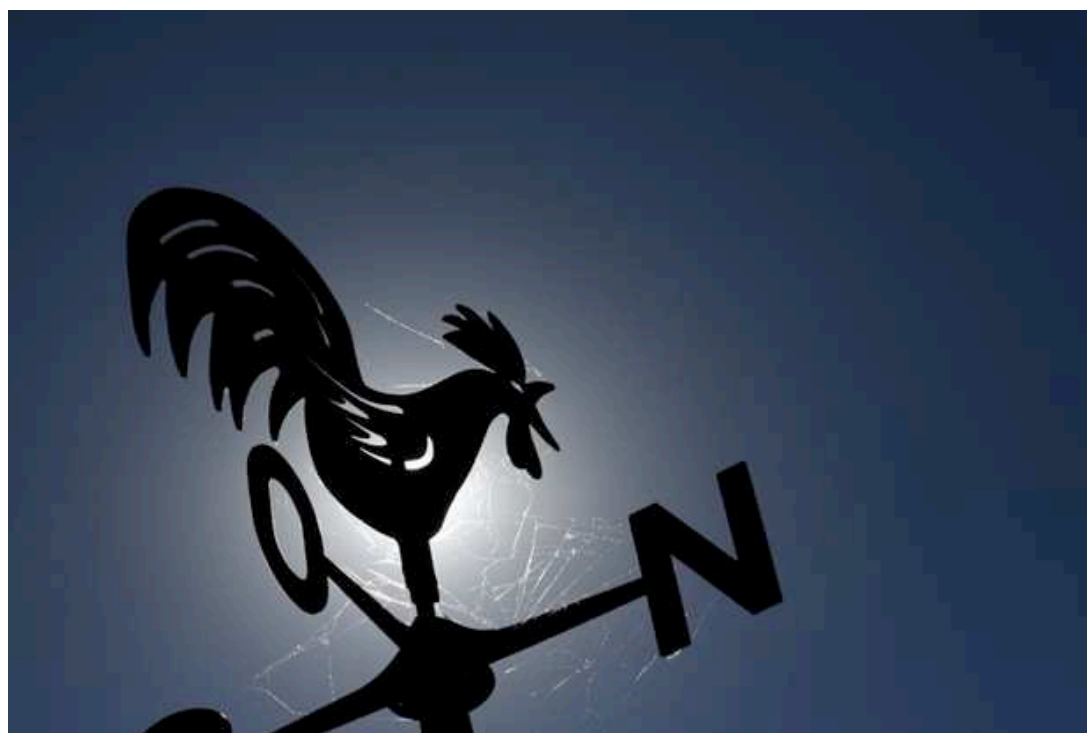
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Staging Europe's Great Debate

To build an ever closer union, Europeans might have to look across the Atlantic: in the United States, a genuine debate over the future direction of the country is still possible.



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The European Union has a long track record as a global beacon of peace, prosperity, and success in fields ranging from culture and science to sports. And yet Europe has attracted more global attention in the last two years than it did in the previous six decades, as its debt crisis – exacerbated by a sputtering economy and internal disagreements – makes headlines worldwide. After all, controversy sells. But the public debate that this controversy has fueled has not been entirely constructive.

Nearly six decades after the Treaty of Rome established the European Economic Community, the debates taking place throughout the EU continue to be conducted largely by national actors in national fora – and with a view

to national interests. To make genuine progress, clearly defined European interests must replace national interests in determining the EU's development.

Defining these interests will require a serious, honest, pan-European debate – one that is more than the sum of national debates. The discussion must be public, engaging European citizens, rather than just the small circle of policymakers that comprises the European Council.

The absence of a European public sphere presents an obstacle to such a discussion. The existing common European space – composed of media outlets like the Financial Times and The Economist, and Europe-wide conferences, NGO networks, and exchange programs like Erasmus – engages only wealthy, cosmopolitan European elites. While social media could offer an opening for creating a more inclusive European public sphere, at least for English-speaking citizens, this will take some more time.

In the meantime, Europeans should view the run-up to the 2014 European Parliament elections as an opportunity to initiate a genuine public debate about their future. They should start by emulating successful public discourse elsewhere, such as in the United States.

To be sure, the recent US presidential election was messy, populist, and corrupted by corporate interests. But it also exemplified a dynamic debate between competing visions of America's future: a more egalitarian country that assumes a constructive global role, or an outwardly aggressive America that is of and for its wealthiest citizens. Billions of people worldwide followed the candidates' engaging – and often theatrical – debates; they did not need a vote to feel invested in the discussion.

In the next 20 months, the most effective features of the US election campaign should be merged with Europe's electoral tradition. The first step toward an inclusive, compelling debate about Europe's future is to ensure that the 2014 elections actually determine which political party or coalition fills government positions, including the executive – as should be the case in a parliamentary democracy.

As it stands, only the European Parliament is directly elected. But it is the European Council, which comprises national politicians, that proposes the EU executive – the European Commission President and its commissioners – on which the parliament then votes. Because these positions are filled without regard for the electoral outcome, citizens do not value European Parliament elections, viewing the entire institution as little more than a jobs program for politicians and their coterie.

To improve this structure without treaty changes, Europe's political-party families, beginning with the largest and most influential, should deliver on their promise to nominate their own candidates for European Commission President. The frontrunners must then conduct real political campaigns,

which their parties design, manage, and finance by pooling existing European and national party resources.

Such pan-European election campaigns would force kindred political parties to develop and win support for a common platform. For example, social democrats could promote a European minimum wage; Greens could advocate for a Europe-wide energy policy that does not rely on nuclear power; and conservatives might champion lower taxes across Europe.

In addition, a forum for pan-European debate must be created. This should entail, first and foremost, broadcasting formal debates between the leading candidates across Europe – the model being the Eurovision Song Contest and the Champions League in football (soccer).

In short, if the EU presents itself as a functioning political system in its own right, with solid democratic structures and processes, it will gain the attention and esteem of its citizens and the rest of the world, leading to increased popular participation at home and greater soft power abroad. Channeling controversy into productive discussion – rather than simply making headlines – is crucial to bolstering democratic processes and addressing urgent problems.

The euro crisis threatens the EU's very existence. But it also provides an opportunity to broaden the crucial debate about Europe's future – a debate that will work only in the context of a genuinely European parliamentary democracy.

*Read more in this debate: **Juliane Mendelsohn, Roland Benedikter, Federico Castiglioni.***

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