

THE RESEARCH COLUMN

What do Eurovision and the Eurozone have in common?

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For those fortunate enough to be in Copenhagen during May, it has been impossible to avoid the spectre of Eurovision. Eurovision has nothing at all formally in common with the European Union, being instituted by the European Broadcasting Union in 1956 when the ECSC was only just getting off the ground. However it shares a strikingly similar aim – to unite a war-stricken continent – and for many people who might show little interest in the EU elections, it remains a potent and visible symbol of the continent's cultural commonalities. Can Eurovision, therefore, illuminate anything about the controversies of European integration? At face value, it seems that Eurovision might actually tell us quite a lot about what it means to be European. As some analysts – such as Alan Renwick of Reading University, writing in the *New Statesman* – have shown, there was actually remarkably strong coalescence within the public vote, with Austria's winning act coming in the top 5 in every country bar Estonia. The convincing nature of the win came as a relief to many, as controversy dogged Austria's submission of Conchita Wurst, a drag act, as their entry. (Indeed, the Russian Ministry for Communications was the recipient of a petition calling for the Austrian entry to be cut from the broadcast, on the basis that the competition had 'become a hotbed of sodomy, at the initiation of European liberals!'). One thing Eurovision might teach us, then, is that there is rather more commonality amongst European citizens than we might imagine – a welcome lesson at the time of the Euro crisis.

Despite the surprising harmony of the result, controversy has still raged over the matter of whether the system of voting is 'fair'. Since 2009, the final country votes have been determined by a combination of 50% popular televote, and 50% 'jury vote', decided by a panel of five industry professionals from each voting country. The impetus for this change from the previous system, based entirely on the popular vote, came with the 2007 results where no Western European country finished in the top half of the competition. The functions of the EBU are largely financed by the so-called 'Big Four' countries ('Big Five' since Italy joined in 2010) of Germany, France, the UK and Spain; who since the

addition of jury voting, have tended to do rather better than before. There are obvious parallels with the current state of the Eurozone. The narrative of 'rich' countries winning the right to make the rules because they pay for the consequences has found particular expression in the popular responses to the crisis, provoking equal bitterness from publics of both 'creditor' and 'debtor' nations, both of whom seem convinced that they have the worse end of the deal. The simplicity of the argument about Eurovision's voting mechanism thus raises deeper questions about how European integration accommodates or exacerbates national power differentials.

In both Eurovision and the Eurozone, it is the extreme discrepancies that highlight the systemic contradictions of the compromise. This year, controversy was focussed on Poland's entry, which came top of the popular vote in both Ireland and the UK, but due to their low-ranking jury scores, received no points from either. In this case, the trade-off between technocracy and democracy is very stark, but it is not an unusual conflict within European integration.

The justification that popular opinion should be eclipsed by the conclusions of industry experts, better able to judge the quality of the song and resist the temptation to vote 'politically', is uncannily redolent of the long-running debates that have swirled around the Eurozone's monetary policy. As Berman and McNamara (1999) argue, the decision to grant the ECB an unprecedented degree of independence in the name of making better policy rests on two empirical canards: that monetary policy is too complex for ordinary people to understand; and that independence correlates with more positive macroeconomic outcomes (Spain, with 25% unemployment, might disagree). They thus suggest that the price of removing democratic oversight is not justifiable. As the current argument over Eurovision's voting arrangement highlights, what is a 'better' outcome is often not straightforward (who's to say that Austria's entry had more musical integrity than Poland's? Who's to say that sub-2% inflation is the most preferable outcome for the Eurozone's population?) and there may be no right answer in the trade-off between democracy and technocracy.

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