

Research Briefing

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By Neil Johnston

# General election television debates



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## Summary

In the run up to a general election speculation often surfaces about the prospect of TV debates between party leaders. In January 2024 [Sir Keir Starmer said he would be happy to take part in TV debates](#).

Before 2010 the UK was considered unusual in developed democracies in not holding televised debates between party leaders during general election campaigns. Contrasts were often made with practices in the United States, where leader debates are well established. There had been discussions about holding debates but no agreement was ever reached.

Televised election debates between party leaders first took place during the 2010 General Election. They were also held during the 2015, 2017 and 2019 general election campaigns. Elections to the Scottish Parliament, Senedd Cymru, and to the Northern Ireland Assembly have also featured televised leaders' debates. This briefing focuses on TV debates for a UK Parliament election.

## 2010 General Election

In 2010, broadcasters and the three main parties reached agreement to hold three head-to-head televised debates between the party leaders, Gordon Brown, David Cameron, and Nick Clegg.

Although there were complaints that the debates dominated the campaign and overshadowed local campaigning, there was a perception that they were useful and an expectation that they might become a permanent feature of the election process.

## 2015 General Election

Negotiations for debates in 2015 failed to find consensus. Eventually proposals were agreed between the parties and broadcasters, but they featured only one head-to-head debate between the Prime Minister, David Cameron, and other party leaders. The political landscape in 2015 was different to that of 2010, with more parties laying claim to enough electoral support to warrant being included in any debates.

## 2017 General Election

The 2017 snap election provided little time to negotiate debate formats. The Prime Minister, Theresa May, quickly ruled out taking part in television debates. Two leaders' debates took place between other party leaders with the Labour leader, Jeremy Corbyn, declining to take part in one but agreeing to the other. In the second, the Conservative Party sent the then Home Secretary, Amber Rudd.

## 2019 General Election

The 2019 election also was held at short notice and provided little time for negotiations. One head-to-head TV debate was held between the Prime Minister, by this time Boris Johnson, and Jeremy Corbyn.

## Should the debates be formalised?

There is nothing in electoral law that requires televised election debates between party leaders. If they take place, they are a matter for the broadcasters and political parties.

There have been calls for an independent body or commission to be established to ensure TV debates happen during general elections.

For example, an e-petition on creating an independent commission to organise compulsory televised leaders' debates attracted 143,390 signatures; [the e-petition was debated in Parliament on 7 January 2019](#). The Government's view was that whether such debates should take place should remain a matter of agreement between political parties and broadcasters and that electoral law should not make them compulsory.

## Do they persuade voters?

Surveys of voters have indicated that the [leaders' debates engaged voters](#) (PDF) that would not normally pay as much attention to the election campaign, in particular younger voters. Many voters found them useful in assessing the options before them.

However, a [recent study from Harvard Business School](#) found that "presidential or prime ministerial TV debates, campaigns' most salient events, do not play any significant role in shaping voters' choice of candidate".

# 1 Background

Before 2010 the UK was considered unusual in developed democracies in not holding televised debates between party leaders during general election campaigns. They had been established features of US presidential elections for many years, with the 1960 Kennedy–Nixon broadcasts setting the tone for discussions about TV debates.<sup>1</sup>

At one time or another all three major UK-wide parties – Conservative, Labour and Liberal – had favoured a debate but agreement could not be reached.

Harold Wilson proposed a televised debate with Prime Minister Sir Alec Douglas-Home in the run up to the 1964 election. Douglas-Home refused. In 1970, Wilson, then Prime Minister, refused an offer of a debate with Edward Heath and reportedly Margaret Thatcher was “lukewarm” to the idea of a televised debate with James Callaghan in the late 1970s.<sup>2</sup>

Often the reason for not holding debates was said to be constitutional: presidential style debates were not appropriate in a parliamentary democracy. In practice, political self-interest also played a role. Writing for the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, Ric Bailey (Chief Adviser, Politics at BBC Editorial Policy) wrote:

Though, in public, the reluctant party leaders cited largely constitutional reasons – in particular, that debates are not appropriate for a non-presidential parliamentary system of government – their more candid considerations focused squarely on political self-interest. Either incumbency or a substantial opinion poll lead – or both – always meant agreeing to debates presented too high a risk for one or other of the parties.<sup>3</sup>

Evidence from Germany suggests that incumbents generally avoid TV debates and that they are likely to see them as.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Nick Anstead, LSE Research Online, [A different beast? Televised election debates in parliamentary democracies](#) (PDF), p10, 2016

<sup>2</sup> Bodleian Library blog, [Televised debates in history](#), April 2010

<sup>3</sup> Ric Bailey, [Squeezing Out the Oxygen – or Reviving Democracy? The History and Future of TV Election Debates in the UK](#), February 2012

<sup>4</sup> Páraic Kerrigan, Susan Liddy, and Anne O’Brien, European Journal of Communication Volume 38 Issue 3, [What factors explain the broadcasting of televised election debates? Empirical evidence from Germany](#), June 2023

## 1997 General Election

It was not until the 1997 General Election that there was a real prospect of a debate.

The two main news broadcasters, BBC and ITN, both approached the parties hoping to agree a format that would lead to televised debates in the run up to the 1997 election.<sup>5</sup> Early in 1997, media reports suggested that the Conservative Party had ruled out a TV debate, with the Independent suggesting that there had “never been much enthusiasm” at Conservative Central Office to accept Tony Blair’s challenge of a debate.<sup>6</sup>

Austin Mitchell, then a Labour MP, commented that the major broadcasters had not agreed the design or scope of a debate. The broadcasters became involved in negotiations with the parties and each other regarding such items as:

- organisation and timings
- whether to have a studio audience
- whether there should be questions from a panel
- whether the debate would be chaired by a moderator/referee.<sup>7</sup>

The idea of the debate being chaired under the independent auspices of a respected organisation such as the Hansard Society was introduced later in the discussion. However, as each of the broadcasters wanted the freedom to control their own format and did not cooperate on an approach, there was not sufficient time to approach the politicians with a complete proposal.

Discussions about the amount of time to allocate to third and fourth parties further complicated the issue when the Liberal Democrats and the Scottish National Party wanted to take part. The broadcasters were not keen on the format as they did not consider this would be popular with the electorate. They wanted a gladiatorial “head-to-head” between the leaders of the two major parties. The broadcasters wanted to pursue a more American format to maximise their viewing figures. According to Mitchell, the net result was that there were too many issues to resolve, and it became too late to schedule a debate.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> “TV tussle for Major-Blair showdown”, Sunday Times, 12 January 1997

<sup>6</sup> “[Tories reject TV challenge](#)”, Independent, 4 February 1997

<sup>7</sup> Austin Mitchell MP, Stephen Coleman (ed), Televised Election Debates: International Perspectives, 2000, Chapter 6: “The Great British Exception”

<sup>8</sup> As above

Talks between the parties and the broadcasters folded at the end of March 1997, with the Financial Times reporting that the two main parties blamed each other for the impasse.<sup>9</sup>

As the campaign progressed, the Financial Times reported John Major was considering holding a live television debate with Paddy Ashdown, the Liberal Democrat leader, in an attempt “to expose Tony Blair’s reluctance to participate in such an event”.<sup>10</sup>

Although there were further negotiations, there was no televised debate between the party leaders. A televised debate did take place between the three main parties’ deputy leaders on BBC 1’s On The Record, on 27 April 1997.

## 2001 General Election

Progress was made with some of the more difficult issues during the 2001 and 2005 general election campaigns. By the 2001 General Election, the broadcasters had agreed a concerted approach. Richard Tait, a Governor of the BBC, and Member of the BBC Trust wrote:

We decided to offer the parties, in effect, a take-it-or-leave-it format which we felt would be fair to all three leaders but would also make for compelling and intelligent viewing. We agreed to make the debates freely available to any other broadcasters such as Sky that might want to carry them. We agreed arrangements for leaders’ debates in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland to take account of devolution. We asked for a decision in principle from the three main UK parties by the end of January 2001. In the event, the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats accepted the broadcasters’ proposals. Labour rejected them.<sup>11</sup>

Labour rejected the proposals. The Prime Minister’s spokesman, Alastair Campbell told journalists, “the UK is not electing a president and our constitutional positions are entirely different”.<sup>12</sup>

## 2005 General Election

During the 2005 General Election Tony Blair again refused to take part in a face-to-face televised debate with other party leaders. Instead, Mr Blair, Michael Howard (the Conservative leader) and Charles Kennedy (the Liberal Democrat leader) took part in a BBC Question Time debate with audience

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<sup>9</sup> “Prospects for a head-to-head clash fade”, Financial Times, 2 April 1997

<sup>10</sup> “Tories consider TV debate with Ashdown”, Financial Times, 16 April 1997

<sup>11</sup> Richard Tait, Simon Atkinson and others (ed), Political Communications: The General Election of 2001, 2002, Chapter 15, “The parties and television, some antidotes to apathy”, p243

<sup>12</sup> “[Blair rejects TV election debate](#)”, Guardian, 18 January 2001

members. Instead of the party leaders debating with each other they faced the audience separately, each for half an hour.<sup>13</sup>

Commentators suggested that, with commanding poll leads in 2001 and 2005, the Labour party did not want to risk a new development which might destabilise opinion, particularly as the tendency had developed for parties to focus on key voters in marginal constituencies, using modern marketing and IT techniques.<sup>14</sup>

It was not until 2009 that, as Ric Bailey put it in his 2012 report, the “political planets aligned”. The incumbent Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition were both willing, and the main broadcasters, BBC, ITV, and Sky came together to negotiate as a joint team. Bailey also suggests that the prevailing national mood meant politicians needed to be more answerable – Labour had been in power for over a decade, and crises in the economy following the financial crash and the expenses scandal in Westminster were fresh in peoples’ minds.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Ric Bailey, [Squeezing Out the Oxygen – or Reviving Democracy? The History and Future of TV Election Debates in the UK](#), February 2012, p20

<sup>14</sup> Dominic Wring and others (eds), *Political Communications: The General Election Campaign of 2005, 2007*, p264

<sup>15</sup> Ric Bailey, *Planets Seldom Align: A Hit and the Misses of United Kingdom Television Election Debates*, published in *Routledge International Handbook on Electoral Debates*, May 2020, p120

## 2

# 2010 General Election

In 2010, broadcasters and the three main parties reached agreement to hold three head-to-head televised debates between the party leaders, Gordon Brown, David Cameron, and Nick Clegg.

The formats were similar for each debate, with format and principles for all three debates agreed between the parties and broadcasters in advance.

The debates were between 85 and 90 minutes long, broadcast live in front of a selected studio audience.

- 15 April – ITV leaders’ debate moderated by Alastair Stewart
- 22 April – Sky leaders’ debate moderated by Adam Boulton
- 29 April – BBC leaders’ debate moderated by David Dimbleby

## 2.1

### Initial proposals

On 2 October 2009, the BBC reported that, together with ITV and BSkyB, it had put forward a joint proposal to stage three live election debates between the leaders of the three main political parties during the next general election campaign. These were put to the Labour Party, the Conservative Party, and the Liberal Democrats:

David Cameron and Nick Clegg have agreed to do so, while Gordon Brown has yet to make his position clear.<sup>16</sup>

Writing on the Labour party website on 3 October 2009, Gordon Brown expressed interest in taking part in a televised debate:

It is right that we set the issues before the British people. Others can work out the details but what’s important for the country is that there is a wide ranging series of television and radio debates with party leaders. It is right that there will be a strong focus on the leaders’ debates and it is right that in a Cabinet system of government that ministers and opposition ministers also debate the issues in a series of debates on radio and television too.<sup>17</sup>

The broadcasters proposed that each of them would be responsible for producing and broadcasting one debate each between the three party leaders. These would be broadcast live and subsequently made available to

<sup>16</sup> [TV Firms Propose Election Debates](#), BBC News, 2 October 2009,

<sup>17</sup> The letter was quoted on the BBC News website: [Full text: Brown's letter to Labour](#), 3 October 2009

the other broadcasters and they would be individually responsible for ensuring due impartiality.

In October the SNP indicated that it could take legal action if their leader, Alex Salmond, was not included in the debates.<sup>18</sup>

There were media reports in mid-November that the BBC, ITV, and BSkyB representatives would attempt to reach a formal agreement on how to stage the debates by the end of November.<sup>19</sup>

## 2.2 2010 agreement

On 21 December 2009 the broadcasters announced that they had reached overall agreement on holding televised party leader debates. There would be three debates between 85 and 90 minutes long, broadcast in front of a selected studio audience. The key principles and formats agreed by the broadcasters are reproduced in the appendices to this briefing. Details of any agreements between parties and broadcasters have not been made public for TV debates in subsequent years.

ITV would host the first debate to be presented by the newscaster and journalist, Alastair Stewart. Sky News would broadcast the second which would be moderated by Adam Boulton, its political editor. David Dimbleby would host the final debate on the BBC. There would also be separate debates involving the main parties in Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland.<sup>20</sup>

### Objections by the SNP and Plaid Cymru

On 22 December 2009 the Guardian reported objections by the SNP and Plaid Cymru. They were concerned that the BBC had breached its obligations to fairness and impartiality. The Guardian reported the two parties rejected assurances from the BBC that other events would include them:

The two parties, who are in government in Scotland and Wales, rejected an assurance from the BBC that they would be given a chance to respond to the three debates and that they would take part in separate leaders' debates in Scotland and Wales.

Stewart Hosie, the SNP's general election co-ordinator, said his party had been given legal advice that the BBC has breached its obligations to fairness and impartiality. "The BBC is supposed to be Scotland's national broadcaster - not a publicity agent for the three London-based parties - and they have already failed in their duty to their Scottish audience."<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> "SNP considers suing over TV general debate", Western Mail, 5 October 2009

<sup>19</sup> "Broadcasters plan three US-style election debates", Independent, 13 November 2009

<sup>20</sup> "[Brown to face three televised election debates](#)", BBC News, 21 December 2009

<sup>21</sup> "[Shadow schools secretary to play Gordon Brown in mock debates](#)", Guardian, 22 December 2009

On 1 March 2010, the Conservatives, Labour, and Liberal Democrats formally agreed to the rules for the televised debates. On the same day, a 73-point specification for the programme format was published (see appendix B).

The BBC announced that it would hold subsequent leaders' debates in Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland and that there would be special arrangements in the week before polling day to ensure that other parties – UKIP, the Green Party and the BNP – would have an opportunity to have their say:

The broadcasters' negotiating panel had a number of ambitions: to involve the public in the debates; to establish a format in which the leaders would actually debate with each other; to make the debates interesting and engaging and not, perhaps, as formulaic and structured as the American presidential debates can be. For some it's making history - for others it's a constitutional anomaly... whichever, the debates will now happen - and election campaigns may never be the same again in this country.<sup>22</sup>

The broadcaster and journalist Michel Crick pointed out that the previous title, “The Leaders’ Debates”, had been changed to “Prime Ministerial Debates”. He suggested this was “a cunning manoeuvre” to “exclude the SNP and Plaid Cymru from the debates” as neither of the party’s leaders, would be Prime Minister.<sup>23</sup>

The SNP and Plaid Cymru continued to oppose the debates. On 10 March they wrote a joint letter to the BBC’s Director-General protesting that the debates would deny “fair competition of ideas” and “could endanger the conduct of a free election”.

The BBC responded that:

the corporation had clearly set out the agreement reached on the televised Prime Ministerial Debates including how impartiality will be achieved.

...

The BBC has also announced it is to hold subsequent leaders' debates in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, part of a range of measures to ensure that the SNP, Plaid Cymru, Northern Ireland and other parties have appropriate opportunities to be heard.<sup>24</sup>

The SNP and Plaid Cymru appealed to the BBC Trust against the Director-General’s decision.

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<sup>22</sup> [“Prime Ministerial debates”](#), BBC News, 2 March 2010,

<sup>23</sup> Michael Crick blog, [How the Leaders' debates were quietly replaced](#), 1 March 2010

<sup>24</sup> [“Anger from Plaid and SNP over televised debate”](#), BBC News, 10 March 2010

On 22 April 2010 the BBC Trust rejected the appeal.<sup>25</sup> The ITV debate had already taken place and the Sky debate was to be broadcast the same evening as the Trust ruled.

The BBC Trust said it was “appropriate” to exclude the SNP’s Alex Salmond and Plaid’s Ieuan Wyn Jones, saying:

Noting the level of past electoral support and the number of candidates standing for the SNP and Plaid Cymru, the Committee concluded that the Director-General’s approach to achieving impartiality was appropriate. That is that SNP and Plaid Cymru have not been included in the Prime Ministerial debate programme but in associated and clearly signposted coverage previously agreed by the BBC.<sup>26</sup>

The Chairman of the Committee adjudicating did note, “we will be writing to the Director-General to emphasise the BBC’s responsibilities during this election period with respect to the expectations of licence fee payers in the nations.” Mr Salmond said the BBC’s decision was “a democratic disgrace”.<sup>27</sup>

The following week a last-minute case at the Court of Session in Edinburgh failed. The SNP wanted the BBC broadcast stopped unless the SNP were included in the programme. The judge, Lady Smith, rejected their bid, saying: “I am not satisfied that it is appropriate to grant the order sought.”<sup>28</sup>

## 2.3

## The 2010 debates

### The ITV leaders’ debate – 15 April

The first television debate took place on Thursday 15 April 2010 at the Granada studios in Manchester. In The British General Election of 2010, Dennis Kavanagh and Philip Cowley noted that an audience of marginally under 10 million watched the debate, which was moderated by Alastair Stewart:

From an early stage, it was apparent that Nick Clegg was performing well and that all the Liberal Democrats’ pre-debate rehearsals had paid off...By contrast, Gordon Brown used too many statistics, his scripted jokes didn’t quite work, and he struggled to connect.

[...]

David Cameron was clearly nervous and underperformed from the beginning.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> [Ad Hoc Appeal Committee – BBC Prime Ministerial Debate Joint appeal from the Scottish National Party and Plaid Cymru](#), April 2010

<sup>26</sup> BBC Trust, [Trust publishes outcome of SNP/Plaid Cymru appeal relating to the BBC Prime Ministerial Debate](#), 22 April 2010

<sup>27</sup> “[SNP and Plaid lose BBC TV debate appeal](#)”, BBC News, 22 April 2010

<sup>28</sup> Outer House, Court of Sessions, [Opinion of Lady Smith in the petition of Scottish National Party and others for judicial review](#), April 2010,

<sup>29</sup> Dennis Kavanagh and Philip Cowley, *The British General Election of 2010*, 2010, p164-5

## The Sky leaders' debate – 22 April

The second debate, in Bristol on 22 April 2010, was broadcast by Sky and chaired by Adam Boulton. The audience was far smaller than for the first debate and was estimated to be around 4 million although it was also carried on BBC Radio 4 and shown later on other channels.<sup>30</sup>

Kavanagh and Cowley noted that this debate was seen as closer without any clear 'winner':

..both Brown and Cameron performed better than they had in the first debate, and they managed to land blows on Clegg, especially over immigration, Trident, and MPs' expenses.

...

Polls showed that the outcome of the debate was closer than the previous week. Although spinners for each of the parties tried to present the result as showing how well their man had done, ... most of the poll results were merely within the margin of error of each other, and showed a broadly tied result.<sup>31</sup>

The Sky debate prompted over 600 complaints to Ofcom, the regulator for communications services including television and radio. Ofcom decides whether to uphold or dismiss alleged breaches of Ofcom codes, including on 'due impartiality' of broadcasters during election campaigns.

The complaints contended that Adam Boulton was biased against the Liberal Democrats because the host commented on an unfavourable newspaper article about Nick Clegg when asking him a question. When calling the other two leaders they were called by name and no additional comments were made.

Ofcom dismissed the complaints. In its view "this one question by Adam Boulton would not - on its own - in Ofcom's view raise issues concerning due impartiality under the Code." Ofcom noted that the 90-minute debate provided numerous opportunities for the three leaders to make their points on a range of subjects and, "given this, the programme was presented with due impartiality with all the politicians facing questions from each other and the audience."<sup>32</sup>

## BBC leaders' debate – 29 April

The third debate took place at the University of Birmingham on 29 April 2010 and was broadcast by BBC One and moderated by David Dimbleby.

In Kavanagh and Cowley's assessment David Cameron was the clear winner: "all the polls put him on top (albeit in one case, jointly)" but they note Labour strategists made complaints to the BBC. In Kavanagh and Cowley's view

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<sup>30</sup> Dennis Kavanagh and Philip Cowley, *The British General Election of 2010*, 2010, p169

<sup>31</sup> As above, p170

<sup>32</sup> Ofcom Broadcast Bulletin, [Issue 161](#), 5 July 2010

“there was the widespread impression that none of the three politicians had anything new to say; many of the arguments used in the previous debates were repeated”.<sup>33</sup>

## Reflections on the 2010 debates

Kavanagh and Cowley commented on the impact of the televised debates on the election campaign:

It was the first ever campaign to feature televised debates between the three main party leaders, something which all involved in the campaigns – participants and observers – accepted would alter the shape and feel of the campaign, although there was less confidence that they would have much effect on the outcome. In the event, the debates had a much greater impact on the rhythm and feel of the campaign than almost anyone had predicted. They effectively became the national campaign, sucking the life out of many of the more traditional aspects of campaigning.<sup>34</sup>

It was this sentiment that prompted David Cameron to call for a different format in any subsequent election. At a Press Gallery lunch in 2012 he said he was in favour of the debates in principle but wanted a modified format because he felt that in 2010 they dominated the campaign:

My reflection on last time was that they did take all the life out of the campaign.

The press and all of us were interested in the runup to the debate, the debate and the post-debate analysis, not the rest of the campaign, which I really enjoy.<sup>35</sup>

A report in 2012, by Ric Bailey, Chief Adviser, Politics at BBC Editorial Policy, noted the split opinion on the desirability of the debates. He highlighted claims by one survey that 90% of those who saw them discussed and debated them with others. He also pointed to others who described them as a “malign move” and “bad for politics and awful for governance”.<sup>36</sup>

Evidence suggested that the debates were welcomed by most voters:

The YouGov surveys after the 2010 election pointed to a widespread welcome for the debates, even if some of that positive reaction was tempered by a desire to see changes next time. More than three-quarters of respondents thought future debates ‘a good idea’, though with around half of them saying they should be ‘done differently’.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Dennis Kavanagh and Philip Cowley, *The British General Election of 2010*, 2010, p184

<sup>34</sup> As above, p157-8

<sup>35</sup> “[David Cameron calls for changes to TV election debate format](#)”, *Guardian*, 10 December 2012

<sup>36</sup> Ric Bailey, [Squeezing Out the Oxygen – or Reviving Democracy? The History and Future of TV Election Debates in the UK](#) (PDF), Published by Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, February 2012, p5

<sup>37</sup> As above, p48

Bailey concluded that there was a broad assumption that they were here to stay.

The assumption of almost everyone – critics and supporters alike – is that such was the impact of the Prime Ministerial debates in 2010, they are surely here to stay – that the electoral landscape in the UK has changed permanently.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Ric Bailey, [Squeezing Out the Oxygen – or Reviving Democracy? The History and Future of TV Election Debates in the UK](#) (PDF), Published by Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, February 2012, p50

## 3

## 2015 General Election

Following prolonged negotiations, the broadcasters announced on 21 March 2015 that the formats for the debates had been agreed.<sup>39</sup>

- 26 March – A live question and answer programme on Channel 4 and Sky News featuring David Cameron and Ed Miliband. Presenters Jeremy Paxman and Kay Burley;
- 2 April – A debate with seven party leaders to be broadcast on ITV moderated by Julie Etchingham;
- 16 April – A debate between opposition party leaders. Moderated by David Dimbleby;
- 30 April – A BBC 'Question Time' special programme with David Cameron, Ed Miliband and Nick Clegg. Presented by David Dimbleby.

Charlie Beckett, Professor in the Department of Media and Communications at the London School of Economics, noted that the debates were no longer a 'novelty', since they had already occurred in 2010. The total audience for the three 2015 debates was down to 15.2 million from 22.5 million in 2010, although the figures were similar if the Question Time special on 30 April was included.<sup>40</sup>

The Question Time special was similar in format to the 2005 special where the leaders faced questions from the audience but did not debate head-to-head.

## 3.1

### The initial proposals

In October 2014, the BBC, ITV News, Sky News and Channel 4 put forward proposals to change the format of the televised leaders' debates to be held before the 2015 general election.

Increased support for smaller parties at the European Parliament elections in 2014 and the surge in support for the Scottish National Party after the Scottish independence referendum complicated negotiations.

Earlier in 2014, UKIP had won the largest share of the vote and the most seats in the European Parliament elections in the UK. UKIP leader Nigel Farage and

<sup>39</sup> [BBC, ITV, Sky, Channel 4 election debates announcement](#), 21 March 2015

<sup>40</sup> Charlie Beckett, Dennis Kavanagh and Philip Cowley (eds), *The British General Election of 2015*, 2015, p284

Liberal Democrat leader Nick Clegg had taken part in two televised head-to-head debates in the run up to that election. The leaders of the Conservative and Labour parties, David Cameron and Ed Miliband, had declined to take part.<sup>41</sup>

The BBC described the changes for 2015, which would include an invitation for Nigel Farage to take part in one of the debates:

The suggested schedule is for debates on 2, 16 and 30 April, ahead of the election on 7 May.

There would be:

- One head-to-head debate between the "two leaders who could become prime minister", Mr Cameron and Labour's Ed Miliband, on Sky and Channel 4 and chaired by Jeremy Paxman
- Another, also to include the Liberal Democrat leader, to be hosted by David Dimbleby, on BBC TV, radio and online
- Another debate, on ITV and chaired by Julie Etchingham, featuring the leaders of the Conservatives, Labour, Liberal Democrats and UK Independence Party.<sup>42</sup>

Nigel Farage said that the offer was "better than it could have been. It does at least recognise the increasing popularity of UKIP. However, if the political landscape continues to change we would expect and ask for inclusion in a second debate."<sup>43</sup>

## Reaction to the proposals

The SNP, the Green Party and Plaid Cymru all criticised the proposals. The then leader of the SNP at Westminster, Angus Robertson, said the proposals would be "utterly unacceptable to any democrat" and added:

... current Westminster voting intentions put the SNP in the lead in Scotland, and it is clearly wrong that the leader of the third biggest political party in the UK should be shut out of these network debates.<sup>44</sup>

Natalie Bennett, then leader of the Green Party, suggested that the broadcasters were out of touch with the public mood and said that it was "clear from votes and polls that the public are fed up with the three business-as-usual parties and are looking around for alternatives."

The then Plaid Cymru leader, Leanne Wood, said:

Broadcasters have shown themselves to be out of touch by clinging on to the notion that there is no alternative to the tired Westminster elite. The people of

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<sup>41</sup> "[Nick Clegg and Nigel Farage in heated BBC debate over EU](#)", BBC News, 3 April 2014

<sup>42</sup> "['Rival parties' anger at TV debate offer to Nigel Farage](#)", BBC News, 13 October 2014

<sup>43</sup> As above

<sup>44</sup> As above

Wales deserve nothing less than to hear what all parties have to offer them, and we will be taking immediate steps to ensure that this happens.<sup>45</sup>

On 10 November 2014 the Guardian reported that the Green Party, the SNP and Plaid Cymru had written to the BBC asking the broadcaster to reconsider its plans to exclude them from the televised leaders' debates.<sup>46</sup> The joint signatories to the letter argued that "there is clear public support for broadening out the leaders' debates" and that the BBC's duties to facilitate a greater understanding of politics to a wide audience "would not be fully discharged if viewers were not given the opportunity to hear from a range of political parties".<sup>47</sup>

The BBC rejected the criticisms. The Green Party had written to the BBC separately the week before the joint letter. In reply the BBC noted that the Green Party had not demonstrated sufficient electoral support to be included:

UKIP has demonstrated a substantial increase in electoral support since 2010...across a range of elections along with a consistent and robust trend across a full range of opinion polls; the Green Party has not demonstrated any comparable increase in support in either elections or opinion polls.<sup>48</sup>

The BBC made similar points in response to a complaint from a Scottish voter who had complained that the SNP were being excluded from the debates:

Ensuring impartiality during an election campaign was a priority and judgements about debates, and other programmes, were taken on the basis of objective editorial assessments of a number of factors, including the levels of past and current electoral support for each party.<sup>49</sup>

In early January 2015, the BBC reported that in an interview on BBC North West Tonight, David Cameron "has said he will not take part in TV debates ahead of the general election unless the Green Party is also included." The report added that:

...he would like the debates to take place "but you can't have some minor parties in and not other parties in".

He went on: "The Greens have a member of parliament, they beat the Liberal Democrats in the last national election - the European Elections, so I don't see how you can have UKIP and not the Greens. That is my very strong opinion."<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> ["Rival parties' anger at TV debate offer to Nigel Farage"](#), BBC News, 13 October 2014

<sup>46</sup> ["BBC under pressure to rethink TV elections debates"](#), Guardian, 11 November 2014

<sup>47</sup> As above

<sup>48</sup> [BBC response to letter from Green Party regarding next year's proposed election debates](#), 4 November 2014

<sup>49</sup> BBC, [Editorial Standards Findings Appeals to the Trust and other editorial issues considered by the Editorial Standards Committee October & December 2014, & January 2015](#), issued February 2015, p165-9

<sup>50</sup> ["David Cameron will refuse TV debates if Greens are excluded"](#), BBC online, 8 January 2015

Ed Miliband, Nick Clegg, and Nigel Farage wrote to David Cameron saying it would be “unacceptable” for the Prime Minister to refuse to appear, saying an empty podium should be provided in his absence.<sup>51</sup>

At Prime Minister’s Questions on 14 January 2015, there was an exchange between Ed Miliband and the David Cameron about the proposals for the televised debates.<sup>52</sup> David Cameron reiterated his position on not having a televised debate unless all the national parties were included:

You can either have a debate with all the national parties who appear in the House, or you can have a debate between the two people one of whom would become Prime Minister—or you can have both.<sup>53</sup>

Ed Miliband said he would “debate with anyone whom the broadcasters invite to debate”.

On 15 January 2015, Nicola Sturgeon, at the time Scotland’s First Minister, said that the case for the SNP to be given a place in a televised leaders’ debate was “unanswerable” and the Scotsman newspaper reported that the SNP was preparing a legal challenge if it was excluded.<sup>54</sup>

## 3.2 Revised proposals

Later in January 2015, broadcasters announced a revision to the proposed formats that would include the Green Party, UKIP, SNP and Plaid Cymru.<sup>55</sup> Details were confirmed in February 2015.

The BBC reported that Sky News and Channel 4 would broadcast a head-to-head live debate between David Cameron and Ed Miliband on 30 April 2015, a week before the general election. The BBC and ITV would stage debates involving the Conservatives, Labour, the Lib Dems, Green Party, UKIP, the SNP and Plaid Cymru, on 2 April 2015 and 16 April 2015 respectively. The broadcasters said the debates would go ahead regardless of whether any party leader refused to take part.<sup>56</sup>

### Reaction to the revised proposals

The Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) were unhappy at being excluded. Both the BBC and ITV rejected their request to be included. In separate letters, ITV and the BBC wrote to Peter Robinson, then DUP leader, and set out the

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<sup>51</sup> [“Election 2015: David Cameron and Ed Miliband in TV debate row”](#), BBC online, 14 January 2015

<sup>52</sup> [HC Deb 14 January 2015 c860](#)

<sup>53</sup> As above

<sup>54</sup> [“SNP call for inclusion in election TV debate”](#), Scotsman, 15 January 2015

<sup>55</sup> [“Election 2015: Broadcasters expected to offer new TV debates plan”](#), BBC News, 23 January 2015

<sup>56</sup> [“Election 2015: TV debate schedule announced”](#), BBC News, 23 February 2015

reasons for not including the DUP in either network debate. The BBC's Director-General, Tony Hall, said:

We would not be fulfilling our obligations of impartiality to the voters of Northern Ireland if we were to invite one of the Northern Ireland parties but not all the others, which also have substantial support in Northern Ireland.<sup>57</sup>

Both the BBC and UTV (then ITV's franchise in Northern Ireland) planned dedicated debates in Northern Ireland involving all the larger Northern Ireland parties.

David Cameron subsequently expressed concern at the exclusion of the DUP from the format proposed by the broadcasters.<sup>58</sup>

Senior DUP members met with BBC management in Belfast to complain but the BBC rejected the DUP's concerns. It stated the plans were unchanged and that:

In Northern Ireland, the BBC will host a separate primetime TV debate to ensure fair and impartial treatment of all the main Northern Ireland parties: the DUP, Sinn Fein, the SDLP, the UUP and the Alliance.<sup>59</sup>

The DUP appealed to the BBC Trust, but the appeal was rejected. The Trust considered that the different treatment of parties in Northern Ireland, which do not contest seats against the main parties in Great Britain was justified:

The Panel was satisfied that the difference in treatment between the Northern Ireland parties and the SNP and Plaid Cymru was based on the different treatment of Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK under the Election Guidelines, and as such, was a reasonable editorial decision for the BBC Executive to have made, and not one in which the BBC Trust should interfere.<sup>60</sup>

The DUP's deputy leader, Nigel Dodds, said that he was "keen to ensure Northern Ireland's voice is heard in any national debate that may take place" and that "the decision means the party is now likely to begin a judicial review against the BBC".<sup>61</sup> He also called for an independent commission to be established to facilitate leaders TV debates in the future.

At Prime Minister's Questions on 4 March 2015, Ed Miliband again pressed the Prime Minister as to whether he would take part in a head-to-head debate on 30 April. In response to a question from Barbara Keeley (Labour) as to whether he would take part, David Cameron said: "I have been very clear. I

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<sup>57</sup> [Televised leaders' election debates - joint statement from the BBC and ITV regarding Northern Ireland parties](#), 29 January 2015

<sup>58</sup> As above

<sup>59</sup> [BBC statement on meeting with the Democratic Unionist Party in Belfast](#), 26 February 2015

<sup>60</sup> [Complaints and Appeals Board – Proposed BBC UK Leaders' Debate Appeal from the Democratic Unionist Party](#), 4 March 2015

<sup>61</sup> [BBC Trust rejects DUP's appeal to be included in TV election debates](#), BBC News Northern Ireland, 5 March 2015

have said, “Get on with the debates before the election campaign,” and I think we should start now.”<sup>62</sup>

Ed Miliband confirmed that he had accepted the broadcasters’ invitations to take part in all three of the live TV debates in April but the BBC reported on 7 March 2015 that Downing Street would not back down on its “final offer” of one seven-way debate before the end of March and “blamed broadcasters for creating a “chaotic” situation during negotiations around the debates”.<sup>63</sup>

An article by Lord Grade, chairman of the BBC from 2004 to 2006, was published in the Times in which he said that it was “not acceptable for unelected journalists and editors to threaten [the Prime Minister] with an ‘empty chair’”. He continued:

If I were still in charge of a major broadcaster, my position would be clear: if we cannot persuade one of the relevant leaders to participate for whatever reason, we cannot go ahead. End of debate. That is what the impartiality laws are designed for.

[...]

Be in no doubt: an “empty chair” is ... a political act, in direct contravention of their duty of impartiality.<sup>64</sup>

### 3.3

## House of Commons debate on 11 March 2015

The DUP secured an opposition day debate on general election television debates on 11 March 2015.<sup>65</sup>

Opening the debate, Nigel Dodds said the DUP did not want to prevent debates between the three main parties, but they were dissatisfied that Northern Ireland parties were being treated differently when considering the inclusion of the Greens, SNP and Plaid Cymru:

When the broadcasters decided that they would invite the Scottish National party from Scotland and Plaid Cymru from Wales to be involved in the national debate, however, that prompted the question of why they would include a party that stands only in Scotland and a party that stands only in Wales but not the Democratic Unionist party, which has more MPs and more votes than Plaid Cymru and more MPs than the Greens, Plaid and the SNP put together.<sup>66</sup>

The DUP repeated its proposal that an independent body should arrange general election debates between party leaders.

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<sup>62</sup> [HC Deb 4 March 2015 c942](#)

<sup>63</sup> [Nick Clegg: Conservatives ‘arrogant’ over TV debate](#), BBC online, 7 March 2015

<sup>64</sup> Michael Grade, “[The broadcasters are acting outrageously](#)”, Times, 11 March 2015 (subscription required)

<sup>65</sup> [HC Deb 11 March 2015 c303](#)

<sup>66</sup> [HC Deb 11 March 2015 c304](#)

The then Minister of State, Cabinet Office, Greg Clark, responded that this was not a matter in which the Government had a direct legislative responsibility:

I think it important for the press—and broadcasters specifically, as part of the press—to be recognised as being robustly independent, and I would not want to breach that in any way.

The Government have no direct role in the conduct of the leaders' debates, which, in my view, is entirely proper. Government policy extends only to the framework by which broadcasters are regulated in the United Kingdom.<sup>67</sup>

Stephen Twigg, speaking for the Opposition, said he did not see any reason “for treating Northern Ireland any differently from Scotland or Wales” but that the Opposition believed that it was “for the broadcasters, not the politicians, to determine the nature of the debates. Even at this late stage, we hope that agreement can be reached.”<sup>68</sup> He also welcomed putting leaders' debates on a more formal footing:

We have said that a Labour Government would put the requirement to stage a fair and impartial leaders debate on a statutory footing...it would simply introduce a system that would work along similar lines to the current party political broadcasts, with the Broadcasters' Liaison Group having the power to come up with proposals for the debates.

[...]

We suggest a deadline of 2017, midway through the next Parliament, for the proposed changes to be put in place. That would give everyone plenty of time to plan for the debates before the subsequent general election. This would be an important constitutional change, introducing a mechanism for the increased accountability of the Prime Minister and other party leaders.<sup>69</sup>

The then Minister for the Constitution, Sam Gyimah, responded that if an independent body oversaw the televised leaders' debates, then a number of questions would have to be answered:

How would it be established and funded? Which debates would it produce? Whom would it invite, and how would it stand up to challenge? How would it succeed in convening the parties, and how would it secure the distribution of the debates among broadcasters? It is an interesting suggestion, but it is obviously not a matter for the Government. Those are some of the questions that rightly need to be answered.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> [HC Deb 11 March 2015 c312](#)

<sup>68</sup> [HC Deb 11 March 2015 c318](#)

<sup>69</sup> [HC Deb 11 March 2015 c319](#)

<sup>70</sup> [HC Deb 11 March 2015 c334](#)

## 3.4

## Ofcom's consultation on party election broadcasts for 'major parties'

On 8 January 2015 Ofcom published a consultation on the political parties it proposed as 'major parties' ahead of the May 2015 elections.<sup>71</sup> The designation is important for how parties are treated by broadcasters, in particular concerning entitlement to party election broadcasts. It was not, as Ofcom noted, directly relevant to broadcasters' negotiations for televised debates.

In the consultation paper Ofcom noted the public discussion about whether leaders' debates might take place during the general election campaign but emphasised that Ofcom had no role in the format of general election debates:

In this context, it is important to note that Ofcom has no role in determining the structure, format and style of any broadcast General Election debates that might take place in future. Rather, our concern would be whether any election debates comply with the rules in relation to due impartiality and elections in Sections Five and Six of the [Ofcom Broadcasting] Code once they have been broadcast.

It is an editorial matter for the broadcasters following agreement with the parties as to the structure, format and style of any leaders' debates. Section Six of the Code will apply to those debates. However, we have no views on the structure, format and style of any such debates, should they be agreed to happen ahead of the 2015 General Election.<sup>72</sup>

Ofcom proposed in its consultation paper that UKIP should qualify for "major party status" for the May 2015 elections because it has "sufficiently demonstrated evidence of past electoral support and current support".<sup>73</sup> However, the Green Party has "not sufficiently demonstrated evidence of past electoral support and current support to qualify for major party status".<sup>74</sup>

On 16 March 2015 Ofcom published a [statement on the results of the consultation](#):

After carefully assessing consultation responses, evidence of electoral performance and trends in opinion polling data up to and including February 2015, Ofcom has added UKIP to the list in England and Wales for the May 2015 elections.

Based on the evidence, the Green Party (including the Scottish Green Party) and TUV have not been added to the list on this occasion.

<sup>71</sup> [Review of Ofcom list of major political parties for elections taking place on 7 May 2015: consultation](#), Ofcom, 8 January 2015

<sup>72</sup> As above, paras 2.6 and 2.7

<sup>73</sup> [Review of Ofcom list of major political parties for elections taking place on 7 May 2015: consultation](#), Ofcom, 8 January 2015, para 2.19

<sup>74</sup> As above, para 2.17

Ofcom gave further details about why the Green Party had not been included in the list of major parties saying the party had not demonstrated significant electoral support at the 2010 election, polling 1% and winning one seat:

In terms of evidence of current support, the Green Party's opinion poll rating has increased over the last two to three years from an average of 3% in May 2012 to an average high of 7% in February 2015 in Great-Britain wide opinion polls.

In terms of evidence of current support for the Scottish Green Party, opinion polls in Scotland indicate average support of under 4%.<sup>75</sup>

## 3.5

## The 2015 debates

### Channel 4 and Sky News Q&A – 26 March

The first 90 minute 'debate' was held on 26 March 2015 and broadcast by Channel 4 and Sky.

Channel 4's election anchor Jeremy Paxman interviewed both David Cameron and Ed Miliband individually. Sky News presenter Kay Burley moderated a question and answer session as members of the audience put questions directly to the party leaders. It was watched by 2.6 million on Channel 4 and 0.3 million on Sky.<sup>76</sup>

Initial reactions were more positive for Ed Miliband based on social media reaction, but a Guardian/ICM instant opinion poll came out 54–46 in favour of David Cameron. Charlie Beckett, Professor in the Department of Media and Communications at the London School of Economics, noted that:

More detailed analysis coverage of the data regarding audience reaction showed that Miliband's gains were minor and that Cameron was still scoring well ahead on the key indicators such as trust and competence.<sup>77</sup>

The Independent reported that there was no clear winner and the programme had led to Ofcom receiving 131 complaints about bias shown in favour of David Cameron.<sup>78</sup> In the end the number of complaints totalled 460 but Ofcom concluded that they did not warrant investigating.<sup>79</sup>

### ITV leaders' debate – 2 April

The second debate was a seven-way debate on ITV between the party leaders. It was held on 2 April 2015 and was a two-hour debate moderated by

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<sup>75</sup> [Ofcom statement on party election broadcasts](#), 16 March 2015

<sup>76</sup> [Ofcom statement on party election broadcasts](#), 16 March 2015, p286

<sup>77</sup> Charlie Beckett, [How the TV debates were organised in #GE2015 and their impact: the full story](#), April 2017

<sup>78</sup> Independent, [Kay Burley 'bias' against Ed Miliband prompts 130 complaints to Ofcom](#), 27 March 2015

<sup>79</sup> [Ofcom Broadcast Bulletin 277](#), 20 April 2015, p39

Julie Etchingham between David Cameron (Conservative), Ed Miliband (Labour), Nick Clegg (Liberal Democrat), Nigel Farage (UKIP), Nicola Sturgeon (SNP), Natalie Bennett (Greens) and Leanne Wood (Plaid Cymru). It attracted an audience of 8 million.

In Beckett's analysis the number of people involved meant that there was little time for leaders to engage with each other and no one made a major breakthrough. In his view no clear winner emerged:

A YouGov poll asking who had 'won' the debate had Nicola Sturgeon ahead on 28% with Farage on 20%, Miliband on 18% and Cameron on 15%. But both a ComRes and Survation instant polls had Cameron and Miliband level as 'winners'.

...

However, the regular opinion polling on intended voting preferences appeared to be unchanged.<sup>80</sup>

## BBC leaders' debate – 16 April

The third debate was broadcast by the BBC on 16 April 2015. It was a 'challenger' debate, which featured five opposition party leaders – Labour, SNP, UKIP, Plaid Cymru and Green, but not the Conservative Party and the Liberal Democrats, who were both in the Coalition Government formed after the 2010 General Election. David Dimbleby moderated.

The average audience was 4.7 million and the critical exchange was seen as the one between Ed Miliband and Nicola Sturgeon and the offer from Sturgeon to "work with us to keep the Tories out of government." An instant Survation poll 90 minutes after the programme put Miliband ahead on 35% and Sturgeon second on 31%. Farage was third on 27%.<sup>81</sup>

A BBC Question Time leaders special was broadcast from Leeds Town Hall on 30 April 2015. Three party leaders, David Cameron, Ed Miliband, and Nick Clegg separately faced 30 minutes of questioning from the TV audience. An average audience of 4.7 people watched. Beckett noted that:

As usual, Miliband was ahead on Twitter approval ratings, although an ICM instant poll of a representative sample of voters in the real world had Cameron on 44% to the Labour leader's 38%. With hindsight we can see that was more accurate than the regular campaign opinion polls on voting intention.<sup>82</sup>

Later in the evening the SNP's Nicola Sturgeon, UKIP's Nigel Farage and Plaid Cymru's Leanne Wood appeared in separate programmes.<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> Charlie Beckett, Dennis Kavanagh and Philip Cowley (eds), *The British General Election of 2015*, 2015, p286-7

<sup>81</sup> Charlie Beckett, Dennis Kavanagh and Philip Cowley (eds), *The British General Election of 2015*, 2015, p288

<sup>82</sup> As above, p288-9

<sup>83</sup> "[Nicola Sturgeon tells debate SNP would have 'big clout' at Westminster](#)", BBC News, 1 May 2015

Beckett concluded that the leaders' debates were a useful platform for leaders to engage directly with voters and for the voters to assess how each party leader performs under pressure. His view then was that they were likely to become an established feature of campaigns.

In the context of this full but flat coverage, the election debates provided much needed variation. They attracted reasonable audiences with extensive further engagement via social media and newspaper reportage. They allowed the public to judge the leaders under pressure and evaluate their arguments in competition with others. They also served an important role in demonstrating that democracy is about putting yourself directly before the public and answering their questions.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> Charlie Beckett, *The British General Election of 2015* edited by Dennis Kavanagh and Philip Cowley, 2015, p298

## 4 2017 General Election

The snap general election of 2017 meant that there was little time for negotiations about whether debates would be held, and if they were to be held, in what format?

The Prime Minister, Theresa May, quickly ruled out taking part in television debates once Parliament had agreed to hold an early general.<sup>85</sup> Labour leader, Jeremy Corbyn, and Liberal Democrat leader, Tim Farron challenged Mrs May to televised dates. SNP leader Nicola Sturgeon insisted that the broadcasters should continue with debates even if the Prime Minister did not show.<sup>86</sup>

In the end there were no head-to-head television debates between the two main party leaders: Theresa May and Jeremy Corbyn. The televised debates that did take place were:

- 18 May 2017 – An ITV leaders’ debate moderated by Julie Etchingham. Seven party leaders from the main parties in Great Britain were invited, but Theresa May and Jeremy Corbyn declined to take part
- 29 May – A Channel 4/Sky News joint programme with Theresa May and Jeremy Corbyn taking part separately in live question and answer programme. Interviews by Jeremy Paxman and Q&A hosted by Faisal Islam
- 31 May – BBC leaders’ debate moderated by Mishal Husain. All seven main GB party leaders took part except Theresa May. The Conservatives were represented by the then Home Secretary, Amber Rudd
- 2 June - A BBC Question Time special programme

### 4.1 The debates

#### ITV leaders’ debate – 18 May

The first leaders’ debate was held on ITV on 18 May 2017, moderated by Julie Etchingham. Invitations to debate were extended to seven party leaders in Great Britain: Conservative, Labour, Liberal Democrat, UKIP, SNP, Plaid

<sup>85</sup> At the time the Fixed-term Parliament Act 2011 was in force and an early general election was triggered by a vote in the House of Commons on a motion for an early general election following a debate [HC Deb 19 April 2017, c 681-712](#)

<sup>86</sup> Guardian, [Theresa May rules out participating in TV debates before election](#), 18 April 2017.

Cymru and Green. The broadcast had an average viewing figure of 1.6 million and was considered a low-key affair.<sup>87</sup>

Both Theresa May and Jeremy Corbyn declined to take part. ITV had said it would not accept representatives, or spokespeople, to appear in the place of the party leaders.<sup>88</sup> The DUP, as in 2015, were unhappy at their exclusion, saying:

They cannot argue that these debates are exclusively for national parties since it is evident that Plaid Cymru do not organise outside Wales, and indeed the Scottish National Party does not organise outside Scotland.<sup>89</sup>

## Channel 4/Sky News joint programme – 29 May

A Channel 4/Sky News joint programme was broadcast on 29 May. Theresa May and Jeremy Corbyn were both separately interviewed by Jeremy Paxman. The audience questions section of the programme was moderated by Faisal Islam. In one analysis the debate saw both leaders grilled but both avoiding any major gaffes:

In terms of the visual and personal impact that matters so much on television, it gave the first indications that the public were less frightened by what they saw of Corbyn and less engaged by May as a character.<sup>90</sup>

## BBC leaders' debate - 31 May

The BBC held the second leaders' debate on 31 May, hosted by Mishal Husain. Like the ITV debate it was expected to feature the five party leaders from the Liberal Democrats, UKIP, SNP, Plaid Cymru and the Green Party. Only 24 hours before it was due to be broadcast Jeremy Corbyn agreed to take part. The Conservative Party decided to field the then Home Secretary, Amber Rudd.

The average audience was 3.5 million. The Prime Minister was again criticised for not participating. The Conservative Party complained after that the audience was biased, with Boris Johnson claiming the debate was an “echo chamber for left-wing views”.<sup>91</sup>

The audience was selected by ComRes, a research consultancy company. They defended their audience selection process saying it was designed to ensure a good spread of views:

- Demographic questions were designed to ensure a balance on age, gender, ethnicity, socio-economic status and working status.

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<sup>87</sup> Stephen Cushion and Charlie Beckett, Dennis Kavanagh and Philip Cowley (eds), *The British General Election of 2017, 2018*, p331-2

<sup>88</sup> “[Party leaders attack May and Corbyn for avoiding TV debate](#)”, *Guardian*, 18 May 2018

<sup>89</sup> “[DUP considering legal challenge over exclusion from ITV debate](#)”, *Belfast Telegraph*, 4 May 2018

<sup>90</sup> Stephen Cushion and Charlie Beckett, Dennis Kavanagh and Philip Cowley (eds), *The British General Election of 2017*, p332

<sup>91</sup> “[BBC election audience 'rigorously' selected - ComRes](#)”, *BBC News*, 1 June 2017

- Adults who had campaigned politically at any election from 2014 onwards were automatically filtered out and not recruited, so as to avoid recruiting ‘activists’.
- Respondents were asked questions on their awareness of the forthcoming General Election and their likelihood to vote, to ensure they were politically engaged.<sup>92</sup>

ComRes argued that the audience selected was designed to ensure a balance of views:

The Conservative and Labour – as the UK’s largest parties – had the largest share of supporters in the room, roughly equivalent to each other. Smaller parties were supported by an appropriately lower number.

The audience also included undecided voters, including people who voted Conservative, Labour or for other parties at the last Election but who are now considering changing their vote.

In addition, ComRes also ensured a 50-50 split of Remain and Leave voters at the EU Referendum, including a small number of people who did not vote.<sup>93</sup>

Speaking after the debate, Andrew Hawkins, founder of ComRes, said the recruitment of people to watch the seven-way debate had been “more complex” than he had ever witnessed. He noted:

If you have a panel of people - one from the governing party (Conservatives) - one from what's regarded as a right wing party (UKIP) and five from broadly left-wing parties, and you give those speakers equal airtime, it means you're giving five slots of airtime to the left-wing parties for every two slots to the not so left-wing parties.<sup>94</sup>

## Question time special – 2 June

The BBC Question Time special was broadcast from York on Friday 2 June 2017 and was moderated by David Dimbleby.

Theresa May and Jeremy Corbyn each faced 45 minutes of questioning from the audience. The average viewing figures were just over 4 million. In their analysis of the debate, Stephen Cushion and Charlie Beckett noted that:

Neither had a meltdown moment or blundered badly...One survey of viewers suggested that Corbyn had scored marginally higher in his performance than May, especially on the measure of ‘understands people like me’ and particularly with young people.<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> ComRes, [ComRes recruitment for the BBC TV Debate, 31 May 2017: Methodology Note](#), published 31 May 2017

<sup>93</sup> As above

<sup>94</sup> [“BBC election audience ‘rigorously’ selected - ComRes”](#), BBC News, 1 June 2017

<sup>95</sup> Stephen Cushion and Charlie Beckett, Dennis Kavanagh and Philip Cowley (eds), *The British General Election of 2017*, 2018, p334

Viewing figures and press coverage of the debates were lower than in 2015. However, according to Cushion and Beckett, in an increasingly digital world the content of the debates still reached millions:

In 2017, especially, the TV leaders' debates provoked extensive reaction on social media, stimulating further by the broadcasters' own efforts to spread their impact via online networks such as Twitter, Facebook and YouTube.<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> Stephen Cushion and Charlie Beckett, Dennis Kavanagh and Philip Cowley (eds), *The British General Election of 2017*, 2018 p335

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## 5

# 2019 General Election

The 2019 election had the first general election TV debate featuring only the two main party leaders, then Boris Johnson for the Conservatives and Jeremy Corbyn for Labour.

In this election the incumbent Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, was challenged by Jeremy Corbyn, the leader of the Opposition, to take part in televised debates. In what the authors of the book *The British General Election of 2019* described as a break with tradition, the Prime Minister took up the challenge. In their analysis the decision by Theresa May to decline in 2017 damaged her campaign, and in contrast:

Conservative strategists felt Johnson was a good enough TV performer, and Corbyn sufficiently unpopular, that agreeing to debates was the less risky option.<sup>97</sup>

Similar themes to previous elections emerged, with smaller parties arguing for equal treatment and legal challenges against the broadcasters.

Writing after the 2019 debates, Ric Bailey, argues that the “gradual-and partial-normalization of debates” means that the idea of regular leaders’ debates at election are “beginning to take root”. However, he points out that whether they continue remains in the hands of the politicians judging whether they can make political advantage.<sup>98</sup>

The main events in the 2019 election were:

- 19 November – ITV debate, between Prime Minister Boris Johnson and Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn. Moderated by Julie Etchingham
- 22 November – A BBC Question Time Leaders’ Special, hosted by Fiona Bruce, with Conservative, Labour, SNP, and the Lib Dem party leaders, including questions from the audience
- 29 November - A live debate on BBC with seven major political parties in Great Britain. The leaders of the Lib Dems, SNP and Plaid Cymru were present. The Conservatives, Labour, Greens, and the Brexit Party fielded senior politicians rather than the party leader

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<sup>97</sup> Robert Ford and others (eds), *The British General Election of 2019*, 2021, p210

<sup>98</sup> Ric Bailey, *Planets Seldom Align: A Hit and the Misses of United Kingdom Television Election Debates*, published in *Routledge International Handbook on Electoral Debates*, May 2020, p124

- 6 December - BBC live head-to-head debate between Boris Johnson and Jeremy Corbyn, hosted by Today presenter and former BBC political editor Nick Robinson
- 9 December - BBC Question Time. Emma Barnett was host for an Under 30 special.

Two proposed debates were cancelled:

- A Channel 4 debate between Boris Johnson and Jeremy Corbyn for 24 November was cancelled after Johnson declined the invitation
- A Sky News debate proposed for 28 November between Mr Johnson, Mr Corbyn and Liberal Democrat Leader, Jo Swinson, was cancelled after neither Mr Johnson nor Mr Corbyn was willing to participate.

Other TV debates were held. Senior party representatives of five parties in Wales took part in a televised debate on BBC Wales on 3 December. This included Plaid Cymru and the Brexit Party. A similar event took place on STV for Scotland on the same night. The four Scottish party leaders of the SNP, Conservative, Labour, and Liberal Democrats took part. A further Scottish leaders' debate was held on BBC Scotland on 10 December.

In Northern Ireland two debates were held between the main five parties in Northern Ireland, the DUP, Sinn Féin, SDLP, UUP, and Alliance parties. One was on UTV on 8 December and one on BBC Northern Ireland on 10 December. On both occasions the DUP represented was a senior party member and the other four parties represented by their leader.

## 5.1 Negotiations

The first TV debate for the general election was announced by ITV on 1 November, for broadcast on 19 November 2019.<sup>99</sup> Only the Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, for the Conservatives and Labour Leader, Jeremy Corbyn were invited.

The negotiations for the ITV debate reportedly focused on ensuring a balanced audience and which topics would be covered; the importance given to Brexit was a particular issue.<sup>100</sup>

The Liberal Democrats and the SNP objected to their exclusion on the grounds that this would be unfair to them and to the electorate. The Liberal Democrat President, Sal Brinton, wrote to the Chief Executive of ITV to object on 4 November. She stated that the party should be included to put the

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<sup>99</sup> [Jeremy Corbyn and Boris Johnson to go head-to-head in ITV debate](#), ITV Press release, 1 November 2019.

<sup>100</sup> Robert Ford and others (eds), *The British General Election of 2019, 2021*, p311

‘Remainer’ point of view and to demonstrate diversity, as the only national party with a woman leader.<sup>101</sup>

The Liberal Democrats also cited section 6.2 of the Ofcom Broadcasting Code as grounds for their inclusion, which states:

Due weight must be given to the coverage of parties and independent candidates during the election period. In determining the appropriate level of coverage to be given to parties and independent candidates broadcasters must take into account evidence of past electoral support and/or current support. Broadcasters must also consider giving appropriate coverage to parties and independent candidates with significant views and perspectives.<sup>102</sup>

The Liberal Democrats also threatened legal action to try to force ITV to change plans for the debate.

ITV’s response pointed out that it was already scheduling a separate live debate to include seven party leaders, as well as the head-to-head, in coverage which it described as intended to “offer viewers comprehensive and fairly-balanced General Election coverage.”<sup>103</sup>

The Liberal Democrats and the SNP submitted a legal challenge to the High Court of England and Wales. The challenge was dismissed and permission to bring a case for judicial review was refused because ITV, as a private broadcaster, was not subject to judicial review; the court said the issue should be lodged with the appropriate regulator, Ofcom. The judgment also dismissed impartiality arguments with the summary ruling going on to say:

3. The decision to schedule tomorrow’s debate in this format was a matter for the editorial judgment of ITV, which cannot be said to have displayed a want of due impartiality for the purposes of the Broadcasting Code: especially in the light of subsequent planned interviews, further debate and other programmes, which are properly to be regarded as a series of “linked” programmes. No arguable breach of the Broadcasting Code is shown.

4. The editorial judgment was, in public law terms, a judgment properly and reasonably open to ITV. It did not take into account irrelevant or immaterial factors or fail to take into account relevant or material factors; and the decision cannot be regarded as irrational or perverse. That the Liberal Democrat Party and the Scottish National Party strongly and sincerely disagree with that editorial judgment gives rise to no valid objection in law.<sup>104</sup>

The negotiations for the BBC reportedly proposed a package of programmes, debates and interviews, to be accepted or rejected in full. There were similar

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<sup>101</sup> [“General election 2019: Lib Dems lodge complaint over ITV leaders’ debate”](#), BBC News, 2 November 2019

<sup>102</sup> [Elections and referendums](#), Ofcom Broadcasting Code, Ofcom, 19 February 2019

<sup>103</sup> [Lib Dems will launch legal action....](#) ITV Press release, 4 November 2019.

<sup>104</sup> [Decision of the Court](#): Liberal Party; Scottish National Party v ITV Broadcasting Limited, 18 November 2019.

focuses on audiences, the prominence of Brexit and impartiality. The package was announced on 9 November 2019.<sup>105</sup>

## 5.2

# The debates

### ITV debate – 19 November

The first leaders' debate was held on ITV on 19 November 2019. It was moderated by Julie Etchingham. The format was a head-to-head between the Prime Minister, Boris Johnson and Labour Leader, Jeremy Corbyn, mainly answering questions put by audience members in the studio. This was the first time that the leaders of the two largest UK parties had participated in a two-way debate.

The broadcast had an average viewing figure of 6.7m, which was an increase on any of the three debates broadcast during the 2017 General Election.<sup>106</sup>

Later in the evening of 19 November, ITV broadcast a series of separate interviews with the party leaders of the Liberal Democrats (Jo Swinson); SNP (Nicola Sturgeon); Brexit Party (Nigel Farage) and Green Party (Sian Berry). They were offered the opportunity to react to the earlier two-way debate, but they did not debate with one another.

A snap YouGov poll conducted immediately after the debate had 51% of the sample who said that Boris Johnson performed best and 49% that Jeremy Corbyn was better. The most common word used to describe the debate by viewers was “frustrating” (58%) with some comments about unanswered questions.<sup>107</sup> The authors of *The British General Election of 2019* said the debate was “a disappointing affair, with both leaders disciplined but dull”.<sup>108</sup>

During the debate one of the Conservative Party accounts for the national Press Office, on social networking site Twitter, was renamed “factcheckuk”. Twitter stated that the party had misled the public by this renaming and that any further attempt to mislead would “result in decisive corrective action”. The fact checking agency, Full Fact, also criticised the action. Conservative Party Chairman, James Cleverly, defended the action and said that the Twitter account remained CCHQPress throughout.<sup>109</sup>

### BBC Question Time Leaders' Special – 22 November

The BBC Question Time Leaders' Special, was broadcast from Sheffield on 22 November and was moderated by Fiona Bruce. Boris Johnson, Jeremy

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<sup>105</sup> Robert Ford and others (eds), *The British General Election of 2019*, 2021, p311-2

<sup>106</sup> [Election debate: Johnson and Corbyn clash over Brexit](#), BBC News [online], 20 November 2019.

<sup>107</sup> [YouGov snap poll finds viewers split on who won general election debate](#), YouGov online, 19 November 2019.

<sup>108</sup> Robert Ford and others (eds), *The British General Election of 2019*, 2021, p315

<sup>109</sup> [“Conservatives criticised for renaming Twitter profile \[...\]”](#), BBC News [online], 20 November 2019.

Corbyn, Jo Swinson, and Nicola Sturgeon each separately faced 30 minutes of questioning from the audience.<sup>110</sup> The average viewing figure was 4.2 million, well below that for the two-way debate on ITV.<sup>111</sup>

Commentators noted that the audience was hostile to all of the leaders and that questions about the trustworthiness of politicians drew laughter during the broadcast. The programme was notable for a declaration by Jeremy Corbyn, for the first time, that he would adopt a neutral stance on leaving or remaining in the EU in a second referendum.<sup>112</sup> He had refused to clarify this, in response to several questions, during the ITV debate. He was also required to defend his past associations with controversial figures and the Labour Party's record on antisemitism.<sup>113</sup>

Questions to Nicola Sturgeon were dominated by Scottish independence. Questions to Jo Swinson focused on unpopular policies during the Liberal Democrats' time in coalition with the Conservatives during the 2010 to 2015 Parliament and the party's position on Brexit. Her responses were "repeatedly interrupted by angry audience interjections."

Boris Johnson faced "audible hostility to his efforts to defend, evade and change track to his preferred talking points" of Brexit and his time as London Mayor.<sup>114</sup>

## Cancelled debates

Channel 4 News had announced a leaders' debate between the Prime Minister and Jeremy Corbyn for Sunday 24 November. Jeremy Corbyn had agreed to take part, but Boris Johnson declined the invitation, with Channel 4 cancelling the debate.<sup>115</sup>

Sky News had also announced a leaders' debate for 28 November. Jo Swinson had accepted an invitation for the planned three-way debate, but neither Jeremy Corbyn nor Boris Johnson were willing to participate.<sup>116</sup> Sky News cancelled the debate.

## Climate debate

On 28 November Channel 4 hosted a debate on the climate change, moderated by Krishnan Guru-Murthy. Jeremy Corbyn, Nicola Sturgeon,

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<sup>110</sup> [Question Time Leaders Special](#), BBC, 22 November 2019

<sup>111</sup> [Question Time four-way leaders' debate gets peak audience of 4.6m](#), The Guardian, 23 November 2019.

<sup>112</sup> "[Leaders get a grilling as audience takes them to task](#)", Evening Standard, 22 November 2019.

<sup>113</sup> Robert Ford and others (eds), *The British General Election of 2019, 2021*, p317

<sup>114</sup> As above

<sup>115</sup> [Channel 4 cancels leaders' debate over Boris Johnson no-show](#), Press Gazette, 22 November 2019.

<sup>116</sup> [Jeremy Corbyn dodges TV debates after disastrous Andrew Neil interview](#), Telegraph, 28 November 2019.

Jo Swinson, Sian Berry (Green Party) and Adam Price (Plaid Cymru) attended.<sup>117</sup> There was no studio audience.

Nigel Farage (Brexit Party) and Boris Johnson declined invitations to take part. Channel 4 declined the Conservative's request to field Michael Gove instead of the Prime Minister. Channel 4 News broadcast the programme with ice sculptures of the globe at the podiums where these two leaders would have appeared. The sculptures melted during the programme.<sup>118</sup>

The Conservative Party had already submitted a complaint to Ofcom about the decision to “empty chair” Boris Johnson and to refuse Michael Gove's participation. Ofcom's Election Committee ruled that the Channel 4 had “given due weight to the viewpoint of the Conservative Party on climate change and environmental policy in the context of the 2019 UK General Election” and therefore the programme did not raise issues warranting investigation under its Broadcasting Code.<sup>119</sup>

## **BBC debate – 29 November**

The BBC broadcast a debate on 29 November involving the main seven parties from Great Britain. This was trailed as a leaders' debate, but in the event Conservatives, Labour, Greens, and the Brexit Party provided “senior spokespeople”. The participants were Rishi Sunak, then Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Conservative); Rebecca Long-Bailey (Labour); Jo Swinson; Nicola Sturgeon; Adam Price; Caroline Lucas (Green); and Richard Tice (Brexit).<sup>120</sup>

## **BBC Prime Ministerial debate – 6 December**

The debate from Maidstone was hosted by Nick Robinson. Boris Johnson and Jeremy Corbyn faced audience questions from a representative audience selected by Savanta ComRes. Average viewing figures were 4.4 million. The authors of *The British General Election of 2019* said the debate was “a forgettable hour with two familiar figures exchanging well-worn lines”.<sup>121</sup>

A snap poll released at the end of the broadcast showed 52% thought Boris Johnson had won the debate with 48% favouring Corbyn.<sup>122</sup>

## **BBC Question Time Under 30 special – 9 December**

A BBC Question Time special with an audience of young voters took place on 9 December 2019, two days before the election. Neither Boris Johnson nor Jeremy Corbyn took part, nor did Nicola Sturgeon, with senior spokespeople

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<sup>117</sup> [Channel 4 news climate debate](#), Channel 4, 28 November 2019

<sup>118</sup> [Tories left on ice in TV debate as leaders vie for climate credentials](#), Guardian, 28 November 2019.

<sup>119</sup> Ofcom, [Decision of the Election Committee on a due impartiality complaint \[...\]](#), 3 December 2019.

<sup>120</sup> [BBC Election Debate: Five things you might have missed](#), BBC News, 29 November 2019.

<sup>121</sup> Robert Ford and others (eds), *The British General Election of 2019, 2021*, p318

<sup>122</sup> Independent, *Johnson and Corbyn trade punches but fail to land knockout blow*, 7 December 2019

replacing them. The leaders of the Lib Dems; Plaid Cymru; Green Party and Brexit Party were involved.<sup>123</sup>

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<sup>123</sup> [“General Election 2019: Under-30s question politicians in TV debate”](#), BBC News, 9 December 2019.

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## 6 Do TV debates help voters decide?

The debates held to date have been seen by many as a success but others, as noted above, criticised them for “sucking the life” out of the campaign (for example, see section 2.3, Reflections on the 2010 debates).

### 6.1 Surveys of voters

Oxford’s Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism published a study of the 2010 debates. Its national survey of voters found that:

- two-thirds of survey respondents said that they had learnt something new from the debates
- three-quarters felt that they knew more about ‘the qualities of the party leaders’ after seeing the debates
- large majorities (between 58% and 70% felt that they knew more ‘about the policies of each party’.
- 55% of younger voters (18-to-24-year-olds) had become ‘more interested’ in the campaign, a higher proportion than any other age group. They were also more likely to have talked about the debates with others than any other age group.<sup>124</sup>

A similar study after the 2015 General Election found similar levels of engagement, with younger voters again more likely to talk about the debates with others than other age groups. The 2015 study found that:

Of people who said after polling day that they were influenced in how to vote by any media source, almost half (48%) referred to the TV election debates as being among the most helpful, a higher figure than for any other source of election information.<sup>125</sup>

The Electoral Reform Society (ERS) commissioned the market research company ComRes to recruit a panel of 2,500 individuals who were questioned before and after the 2017 Question Time special, where Prime Minister Boris Johnson and Leader of the Opposition, Jeremy Corbyn, separately faced questions from the Question Time audience.

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<sup>124</sup> Stephen Coleman and others, [Leaders in the Living Room](#), p4

<sup>125</sup> Stephen Coleman and others, [The 2015 Televised Election Debates Democracy on Demand?](#) University of Leeds, December 2015

30% of respondents of the panel endorsed the statement that ‘The programme helped me to decide whether to vote on Polling Day’ and 34% considered that ‘The programme helped me to decide what party to vote for’. The ERS findings also concluded that younger people claimed to have learned considerably more about British politics from the programme than older ones, and more of the younger electors said they had found the programme helpful in deciding both whether and how to vote on polling day.<sup>126</sup>

The Hansard Society’s report, *Audit of Political Engagement 2018*, found the top three methods for deciding how to vote were:

- debates or interviews with party leaders or other politicians (74% of those surveyed);
- face-to-face discussions with other people (72%),
- online news stories, accessed directly from news websites and not via social media posts (70%).<sup>127</sup>

## Comparison with Canadian leaders’ debates

By way of comparison, the Canadian Leaders’ Debates Commission’s report found that the number of viewers of Canada’s 2019 debates was higher than in the previous two federal elections, but viewers watched for longer.

It found that nearly 60% of English-language viewers and nearly half of French-language viewers reported discussing the debates with other people.

The Commission’s polling also found the debates caused viewers to pay more attention to news and to talk more about the federal election. The survey also found that 56% of Canadians said the leaders’ debates were important for their vote.<sup>128</sup>

## 6.2

## Do TV debates change voters’ minds?

Whether TV debates actually sway voters one way or other is unclear.

A Harvard Business School study found that while campaigns overall are important for voters in making up their mind, the “presidential or prime ministerial TV debates, campaigns’ most salient events, do not play any significant role in shaping voters’ choice of candidate”.<sup>129</sup>

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<sup>126</sup> ERS, [Debating the TV Debates How voters viewed the Question Time Special](#),

<sup>127</sup> Hansard Society, [Audit of Political Engagement 15: The 2018 Report](#), p26-7

<sup>128</sup> Leaders’ Debates Commission, [Democracy matters, debates count](#), 2020, p13

<sup>129</sup> Harvard Business School, [How Do Campaigns Shape Vote Choice? Multi-Country Evidence From 62 Elections and 56 TV Debates](#), Working paper 20-031, p39

[Dean Burnett](#), a neuroscientist author and blogger, wrote an article for the Guardian in 2015 entitled “Televised leaders’ debates are pointless (according to science)”.

He wrote that there are many known psychological processes and techniques for persuading people but that TV debates are rarely set up to take advantage of them:

these usually require subtle manipulations and full control of the interaction. A TV debate rarely, if ever, offers any of these things. The debaters do not control the questions, are time restricted, and are constantly wary of doing or saying something that could be interpreted in a negative way by the potential voters or more hostile elements of the press, which, given how people vary so much and the tactics of much of the media, could genuinely be anything.<sup>130</sup>

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<sup>130</sup> Dan Burnett, “[Televised leaders’ debates are pointless \(according to science\)](#)”, Guardian, 10 March 2015

## 7

## Should there be a requirement that debates are held?

There have been calls for a statutory requirement to hold televised debates. There is no requirement in electoral law for televised debates between party leaders. Whether they happen in future elections is a matter for broadcasters and political parties to agree.

Writing for a BBC Blog ahead of the 2019 debates, the Head of BBC Newsgathering, wrote that organising TV debates is difficult because it's impossible to meet everyone's demands, but that they reach audiences that other programmes don't:

Televised debates of a sort have featured in every general election campaign since 2010, but the format of the programmes has evolved since then. Politics has changed across much of the UK, with old voting patterns transformed as large parts of the electorate transfer allegiances in different sorts of elections and are tested by different loyalties in referendums.

...

Throughout this period of change, there has been one continuing truth about staging election debates - you simply can't come up with a formula which pleases everyone. So they can be fiendishly difficult to organise. But it's always worth remembering what research suggests: debates reach parts of the electorate which other programmes often don't.<sup>131</sup>

Some countries do have dedicated organisations that arrange TV debates. In the USA the [Commission on Presidential Debates](#) was established in 1987. It is a non-profit organisation that seeks to ensure TV debates for US Presidential elections every four years. It receives no funding from the government or any political party, political action committee or candidate.

Canada has a [Leaders' Debates Commission](#) that is a "is an independent and impartial public body mandated to organize federal leaders' debates in Canada's general elections".

Writing after the 2015 UK General Election, Charlie Beckett, notes that while most people accept televised debates are likely to remain a feature of election campaigns there are doubts about the desirability of a formal commission or framework to make them statutory:

While a formal independent structure to organise debates sounds attractive, it raises questions about who would have the final say and how adaptable it would be if the political landscape continues to evolve. A debate commission

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<sup>131</sup> BBC blog, [Our 2019 Election Debates](#), 8 November 2019

sounds like a practical step but the parties will not agree to one unless it gives them more power.<sup>132</sup> I

## 7.1

# Calls for a TV debates commission

## Electoral Reform Society and Canadian model

The Electoral Reform Society (ERS) has called for a debates commission to be established.

The ERS Chief Executive has called for an end to “the debates over debates” and deals being reached by parties and broadcasters. They said:

Party leaders cannot be allowed to decide each election what to do – we need a more standardised and transparent approach. Voter should be guaranteed vibrant, multi-party debates – as well as head-to-heads that reflect how voters are ‘shopping around’ today.<sup>133</sup>

The ERS highlighted the example in Canada where legislation was passed in 2018 establishing a Leaders’ Debates Commission, with a budget of \$5.5 million, for the 2019 federal elections.<sup>134</sup> Their mandate was to draw up procedures for two leaders’ debates (one in English and one in French) to take place during the national Federal Election in 2019 and to report on these to the Parliament.<sup>135</sup>

The Commission was wound up after delivering its report. In its report the Commission recommended that a similar permanent Commission should be set up by legislation for future federal elections.

There was criticism though that the Commission’s participation criteria were set by the Government Order that set up the Commission rather than the Commission itself. The Commission’s final report on the 2019 elections said that any permanent Commission should be set up with real and perceived operational independence, including setting its own participation criteria.<sup>136</sup>

The Commission also faced accusations of procedural unfairness after it initially denied press accreditation to two organisations.<sup>137</sup>

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<sup>132</sup> Charlie Beckett, Dennis Kavanagh and Philip Cowley (eds), *The British General Election of 2015*, 2015, p298-9

<sup>133</sup> ERS Press release, [Politicians should not be able to call the shots on TV election debates](#), 18 November 2019.

<sup>134</sup> [Leaders’ debates Commission, Order in Council P.C. 2018-1322](#)

<sup>135</sup> Leaders’ Debates Commission, [Democracy matters, debates count](#), 2020.

<sup>136</sup> As above, p35

<sup>137</sup> Canadian Lawyer, [True North and Rebel News seek judicial review on press accreditation denial for debates](#), 11 October 2019

In terms of the 2019 federal elections the Commission concluded that the debates had been a success:

We delivered two debates that reached and engaged Canadians like never before. We also hope future Commissions will continue to measure and study debates in Canada and internationally: we need to learn so we can continue to improve.

These debates counted. They were key moments that helped Canadians cast informed votes. In an era of concern about our institutions and the health of democracy itself, that is a harbinger of hope.<sup>138</sup>

In November 2020, the Canadian Government reappointed a Debates Commissioner and issued a revised Order to make the Commission permanent. The revised mandate allowed the Commission to set clearer, more objective participation criteria and final approval of the debates' format.<sup>139</sup>

## Lords Communications Committee inquiry

The Lords Select Committee on Communications conducted an inquiry on broadcast general election debates in 2014.

It heard from many witnesses that considered that the debates were a success. However, it concluded that there were “no good arguments” for the introduction of a debates commission to organise future debates.<sup>140</sup> It noted that broadcasters were already under regulatory requirements to give due impartiality, particularly at election times, and encouraged broadcasters to do more to inform voters.

Suggestions have been made for the establishment of an independent body to oversee the organisation and arrangement of debates. We see no need for that but we do think that the broadcasters could collectively do more to inform voters and encourage the public to be interested in the issues and the process. We already know that 87% of 18-24 year olds – traditionally the demographic most likely to experience voter apathy – said that the debates led to them discussing the election and relevant issues with their peers.<sup>141</sup>

The scope for broadcasters to collectively do more was also highlighted by Charlie Beckett:

Broadcasters are better served by maintaining their independence. However, there are useful principles to abide by. Broadcasters should produce an offer and as with every other kind of programme making, the subject has the right not to take part. Broadcasters need to keep a united front and produce as simple a proposal as possible. They have to stress the public value of these

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<sup>138</sup> Canadian Lawyer, [True North and Rebel News seek judicial review on press accreditation denial for debates](#), 11 October 2019, p34.

<sup>139</sup> Leaders' Debate Commission, [Democracy matters: Making debates count for citizens. A report on the Leaders' Debates Commission 2021 federal election experience](#), Section 1

<sup>140</sup> Lords Select Committee on Communications, [Broadcast general election debates](#), HL 171 2013-14, 13 May 2014

<sup>141</sup> [Lords Communications Committee press release](#), 13 May 2014

debates but that includes the potential for robust and direct exchanges with the speakers and the public. They should have proposals ready on time but they should also then be open-minded about adjusting the model right up to a short period before transmission.<sup>142</sup>

## The Hansard Society

The Hansard Society's report, *Audit of Political Engagement 2018*, analysed sources of election-related news and information for the 2017 General Election. It found that the top three methods of information and news for the election were:

- the more traditional mediums of news/news programmes on TV and radio (reaching 69% of those surveyed)
- printed material from the parties (49%)
- printed newspapers/magazines (39%).

However, the top three most used sources of information were not the same as the top three most important sources for deciding how to vote. The top three for deciding how to vote were:

- debates or interviews with party leaders or other politicians (74% of those surveyed)
- face-to-face discussions with other people (72%)
- online news stories, accessed directly from news websites and not via social media posts (70%).

The report concluded that leaders' debates should be formalised, such as under the governance of an independent organisation, given the important role that such debates had in helping voters to decide how to vote:

Other important features of elections (and of our democracy more broadly) operate in accordance with rules that are independently determined and impartially administered. There is a strong case for similarly institutionalising party leaders' debates in the future.

An independent body, for example, could revisit the rules governing the line-up, format and timing of the debates. In doing so, any such body should not lose sight of the broadcasters' wish to deliver content that is entertaining as well as informative, nor of the public's potential desire to participate. But at the heart of its work should be the commitment to deliver a debate model that, above all, meets the primary public interest purpose of better informing the electorate.<sup>143</sup>

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<sup>142</sup> Charlie Beckett, Dennis Kavanagh and Philip Cowley (eds), *The British General Election of 2015*, 2015,, p298

<sup>143</sup> Hansard Society, *Audit of Political Engagement 15: The 2018 Report*, p26-7

## Pledges from political parties

The Liberal Democrats included a pledge in their 2017 General Election manifesto to provide for Ofcom to organise debates:

Mandate the provision of televised leaders' debates in general elections based on rules produced by Ofcom relating to structure and balance, and allowing for the empty-chairing of party leaders who refuse to attend.<sup>144</sup>

As noted above, Labour pledged in 2011 to put leaders' debates on a statutory footing, but no mention was made in the 2017 or 2019 manifestos.

## E-petition calling for an independent debates commission

An [e-petition calling for the establishment of an independent commission](#) to facilitate debates attracted over 100,000 signatures and was debated in Westminster Hall on Monday 7 January 2019. The debate was sponsored by Steve Double (Conservative).

The petition was backed by Sky News, which has highlighted that the campaign has cross-party support, including from Jeremy Corbyn, Caroline Lucas, Sir Vince Cable, Amber Rudd, Peter Bone, and the SNP.<sup>145</sup>

Mr Bone has also introduced two Private Members' Bills, [General Election \(Leaders' Debate\) Bill 2017-19](#) and the [General Election \(Leaders' Debates\) Bill 2019-21](#), to legislate to create a commission to make arrangements for debates. However, both were [Presentation Bills](#), which rarely go on to become law.

The Government's response to the e-petition made it clear it did not agree, saying "The Government has no plans to change electoral law to make televised elections debates mandatory."<sup>146</sup>

During the debate many of the existing arguments for and against making the debates compulsory and the establishment of a commission to facilitate them were raised.

David Drew (Labour/Co-op) commented that the 2010 debates "let the genie out of the bottle" and that there was now an expectation that TV debates should be held and arranged by an independent body.<sup>147</sup>

Jonathan Edwards (Plaid Cymru) argued that every party contesting a general election should be included in the debates. A similar point was made

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<sup>144</sup> Liberal Democrats, *Change Britain's Future: Liberal Democrat Manifesto 2017*, p91

<sup>145</sup> Sky News, [Top politicians back Sky News' election TV debate campaign](#), 22 September 2018

<sup>146</sup> [E-petition 228527](#), Make TV election debates happen - establish an Independent Debates Commission, including Government response,

<sup>147</sup> [HC Deb 7 January 2019, c6WH](#)

by Tommy Sheppard (SNP) later in the debate.<sup>148</sup> Peter Bone (Conservative) advocated the proposal in his Private Member's Bill, that there should be three debates with one involving the parties represented in the House of Commons and two other head-to-head debates between the Prime Minister of the day and the Leader of the Opposition.<sup>149</sup>

John Lamont (Conservative) commented that "if a leaders' debate is about assessing how potential Prime Ministers perform, how does that model accommodate smaller parties?". He also commented that in his view "leaders' debates suck the oxygen away from local campaigns" with media focusing on leaders' performance and appearance and not on the "critical issues of the election".<sup>150</sup>

Peter Heaton Jones (Conservative) questioned how a party leader could be compelled to attend and what enforceable sanction would be available if they did not. He also questioned whether a statutory independent commission would be any less likely to face legal challenge about the format it had decided than the broadcasters had done in the past. However, he did agree that if TV debates were to be placed on a statutory footing then it would be appropriate to take the arrangements of them out of the hands of the parties and the broadcasters.<sup>151</sup>

Kevin Brennan (Labour), the Shadow Minister for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport returned to the theme of how minor parties might be included in debates and in particular the Northern Ireland parties, saying "Northern Ireland has largely been excluded from that process, even though it is an integral part of the United Kingdom."<sup>152</sup>

He went on to say that the Labour Party "support, in broad terms, the campaign that there should be some sort of independent means to ensure that TV debates take place between party leaders at general elections."<sup>153</sup>

The Minister for the Constitution, Chloe Smith, responded for the Government. She welcomed that debates had been held in recent years but reiterated the Government's view that the debates should not be required by statutory provision:

Participating in TV election debates should continue to be a matter for political parties, and we should continue to view that as a two-way relationship, with the encouragement of voters. The delivery of such debates should remain in the hands of broadcasters, other publishers and, indeed, the public themselves, through social media and the other media of the future.<sup>154</sup>

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<sup>148</sup> [HC Deb 7 January 2019, c24-5WH](#)

<sup>149</sup> [HC Deb 7 January 2019, c10WH](#)

<sup>150</sup> [HC Deb 7 January 2019, c15-6WH](#)

<sup>151</sup> [HC Deb 7 January 2019, c20-1WH](#)

<sup>152</sup> [HC Deb 7 January 2019, c27-8WH](#)

<sup>153</sup> [HC Deb 7 January 2019, c29WH](#)

<sup>154</sup> [HC Deb 7 January 2019, c36WH](#)

The minister also noted the concerns relating to enforcing provisions for TV debates held on a statutory basis and questioned the prioritisation of one campaign medium, television, over all others including digital.

Steve Double wound up the debate by summarising the main difference between the contributions was the process for making them happen:

In winding up, I simply make the point that it is important that we embrace all methods of engaging the public in politics, particularly at the time of elections. I was thankful that the Minister made clear that she welcomes TV debates. It is not that anyone is against TV debates; the issue is how we facilitate them.<sup>155</sup>

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<sup>155</sup> [HC Deb 7 January 2019, c38WH](#)

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## Appendix A – Key principles – 2010 debates

The key principles agreed by the broadcasters on the basis of holding a series of Prime Ministerial debates:

- 1 There will be three live TV debates during the forthcoming general election campaign.
- 2 There will be one debate in each full week of the campaign assuming the election is called at least four weeks before polling day.
- 3 If there are less than four weeks between the election being called and polling day, it may be necessary to schedule two debates in one week. The first debate will not be held before the fourth day after the start of the campaign.
- 4 Each of the three broadcasters, the BBC, ITV, and BSkyB will be responsible for producing their own individual debate programme in three separate locations in England.
- 5 ITV will produce the first debate in the North West. Sky will produce the second debate in the South/South West. The BBC will produce the third debate in the Midlands.
- 6 The three party leaders of the Labour, Conservative and Liberal Democrat parties will appear in each debate programme.
- 7 Each party leader will have equal treatment in each programme. The broadcasters will each nominate one person who will monitor the debate and be contactable by a nominated representative of each of the parties during the debate. The broadcaster's nominated person will advise and liaise with the executive producer who will have responsibility for ensuring equal treatment.
- 8 Each debate will be between 85 and 90 minutes in duration, transmitted live by the originating broadcaster in peak time.
- 9 There will be no advertising within the programme.
- 10 The format of the debate will be the same for all broadcasters.
- 11 Around half of each debate will be themed.
- 12 There will be a live audience, transparently selected mainly from the surrounding region by an agreed and reputable polling company.
- 13 Each audience will be broadly representative of the country as a whole subject to detailed discussions with ICM and agreement with the parties.

- 14 Each broadcaster will have a named editorial panel of their own to select the questions submitted by the public. Each will set out the criteria by which questions may be selected.
- 15 Each debate will be hosted by a single presenter provided by the host broadcaster. Alastair Stewart, ITV; Adam Boulton, Sky; David Dimbleby, BBC.
- 16 BSkyB and the BBC will make their programmes available to other broadcasters simultaneously. ITV will make their programme available to other television broadcasters immediately after transmission and available simultaneously to online and radio.
- 17 This proposal is subject to each broadcaster complying with its duties on due impartiality and election coverage across the nations of the UK.<sup>156</sup>

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## Appendix B – Programme format – 2010 debates

[Format - Prime Ministerial Debates - Programme Format - agreed by all parties 1st March 2010.](#)

### **Audience selection**

1. The objective is to select an audience which is broadly a demographic cross section of the country.
2. The audience to be made up of roughly 200 people, subject to venue capacity.
3. ICM has been appointed as an external recruitment agency and the methods of recruitment are based on their expert advice. In broad terms, we will aim to:
4. Recruit within a 30 mile radius of the host city, mindful of administrative borders on either side of that radius based on the revised ICM list of constituencies.

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<sup>156</sup> [Prime Ministerial Debates](#) BBC News 2 March 2010

5. Recruit according to gender, age, ethnicity, and social class to best reflect the broader voting-age population. The recruitment procedure will be transparent, and its methodology will be available to the parties for comment.
6. Ensure around 80% of the audience is made up of voters who express a voting intention at the time of recruitment.
7. These will be subdivided into ratios which reflect a ratio of 7 Labour, 7 Conservative, 5 LibDem. The political ratios will take precedence over the demographic in the final selection of the audience by ICM.
8. Within the 80% (see point 6) the broadcasters retain the right to recruit some audience members who express an intention to vote for smaller parties.
9. Ensure that around 20% of the audience will be undecided but will be politically engaged. ICM's definition of undecided voters to be the basis of this selection.
10. Reserve a small number of seats for participants from outside the ICM selected audience, whose questions have been pre-submitted and selected by the broadcaster's editorial panel. The broadcasters may use a variety of methods to encourage the submission of such questions from across the UK in the build up to the debates.
11. The number of questions from outside the ICM selected audience will be a maximum of four per debate.
12. Over-recruit by a small margin to accommodate "drop outs" or "no shows"
13. Issue audience members with a protocol of rules, including security procedures for entry and conduct during the debates. The protocol will be agreed by the parties.

#### **Audience role**

14. The objective is to ensure maximum debate between the party leaders - the distinctive characteristic of these programmes - whilst allowing the audience's voices to be heard directly posing questions.
15. Each broadcaster will nominate a panel to choose the questions for its debate. The panel's membership will be public, but they will meet in private.
16. Each selection panel will include a member to oversee compliance. List of names of panel members attached
17. The objective of each panel shall be to ensure fair question selection in order to frame a balanced debate within the rules of our agreements.
18. The panel will meet confidentially in the weeks running up to their debate.

19. All questions submitted by the ICM selected audience will be seen by a member of the panel. Email questions will be sifted and a selection given to the panel.
20. Initially, each panel will sift through a selection of questions drawn from those submitted by members of the public.
21. They will narrow down their selections in a series of meetings up to and including the day of the debate.
22. Each panel will have five to seven members, including a designated chair who would have a casting vote if necessary.
23. The panel cannot be quorate with fewer than three of its members present.
24. In selecting its questions, the panel will take full account of the following:
  25. each question will be relevant to all three party leaders.
  26. no question shall focus on one party or one leader.
  27. all questions will be based on election issues
  28. Audience members will be made aware of these rules before submitting their final questions.
  29. Half the programme will be based on the agreed theme. Within that portion of the programme, a maximum of three questions will be selected on a single sub-theme (as listed in point 65 of this document).
  30. Half the programme will be unthemed. In this portion of the programme, a maximum of two questions will be selected on a single subject.
  31. The range of questions chosen will reflect the broadcasters' legal and compliance responsibilities for due impartiality and fairness.
  32. The panel will use its editorial judgement to select questions and will take into account factors such as the prominence of certain issues in the campaign, the distinctiveness of the different parties' policies on election issues, voters' interest and issues relevant to the role of the Prime Minister.
  33. Within these rules, the editorial independence of the panel shall be paramount, because each broadcaster is answerable to its regulator for its programme content.
  34. Questions may be selected by the editorial selection panel up to the start of the debate.
  35. The selected questions will not be shown to anyone outside the editorial team in advance of the programmes.

36. Members of the audience will ask their questions. The moderator will ask the leaders to respond. The moderator may read email questions.

37. All questions will be addressed to and answered by all three leaders.

38. The audience members will be restricted to asking the selected questions.

39. There will be an option of viewer involvement via emails read by the moderator.

40. In order to maximise the time available for viewers to hear the leaders discussing election issues with each other, the studio audience will be asked not to applaud during the debate. There will be opportunities to do so both at the beginning and at the end of each programme.

#### **Structure of programme**

41. The programme will start with all three leaders on set and standing at their podiums.

42. The moderator will have a podium/desk and will move within a small area to allow eye-line with the audience and the leaders.

43. The moderator will introduce the leaders,

44. The first half of the programme will be on the agreed theme but with the agreement of all the parties, in case of a major national or international event not included in the theme of the debate, the moderator will ask the leaders for their reaction to the development at the start of the programme before moving on to the theme.

45. The time taken for the reaction to such an event will be added to the time available for the themed part of the debate, unless the event is clearly part of the theme of the debate, in which case the reaction will be counted as part of the time allotted to the theme.

46. Each leader will make an opening statement on the theme of the debate lasting for 1 minute. After the three opening statements the moderator will take the first question on the agreed theme. There will be closing statements of 1 minute 30 seconds from all three leaders at the end of the 90 minutes.

47. Each leader will have 1 minute to answer the question.

48. Each leader will then have 1 minute to respond to the answers.

49. The moderator may then open the discussion to free debate between the leaders for up to 4 minutes on merit.

50. The length of the debate on each question will be decided by the programme editor.

51. The programme editor will use their best endeavours to keep to the 4 minute time allowance but it may need to be extended in the interest of equality of treatment.

52. Questions will be taken on the theme until around half way through the programme, depending on timing and ensuring fair treatment of all three leaders.

53. At the end of the themed period, the moderator will open the debate to general questions selected by the broadcaster's panel from the audience or via email.

54. The same timing format will apply to the general questions i.e. each leader will have 1 minute to answer the question. Each leader will then have 1 minute to respond. The moderator will then open the discussion to free debate between the leaders for up to 4 minutes on merit.

55. There will be a clock indicating the time remaining for statements, answers to questions and responses. This will be visible to the candidates and moderator but not to the audience in the debate or on screen.

56. The order of speakers, based on an agreed grid, has been determined by the parties drawing lots.

57. At the end of the programme the three leaders will shake hands.

#### **Role of the moderator**

58. To moderate the programme

59. To keep the leaders to the agreed time limits

60. To ensure free-flowing debate being fair to all candidates over the course of the programme.

61. To ensure fairness on the direction of the programme editor

62. To seek factual clarification where necessary

63. It is not the moderator's role to criticise or comment on the leaders' answers.

64. The candidates accept the authority of the moderator to referee the rules on stage and ensure a free flowing, fair debate conducted within the agreed rules

#### **Themes**

65. Order of themed debates. The order of the themes for the first half of each programme was determined by the broadcasters drawing lots. The order is as follows:

1. Domestic affairs including but not exclusively: NHS; Education; Immigration; Law and Order; Family; Constitution; Trust in politics; Political reform;
2. International affairs including but not exclusively; International relations; Afghanistan; Iraq; Iran; Middle East; UK defence; International terrorism; Europe; Climate change; China; International Development
3. Economic affairs including but not exclusively: financing of public services; Taxation; Debt; Deficit; Public finances; Recession; Recovery; Banking and finance; Business; Pensions; Jobs.

### **Set**

66. The leaders will stand at podiums throughout the debate. The positions of the three leaders during the debates are to be determined by agreement with all parties.
67. The moderator will have a podium/desk and will move within a small area to allow eyeline with the audience and the leaders.
68. Each broadcaster responsible for their own titles, music, branding etc.

### **Audience cutaways**

69. The purpose of the programmes are for the viewers to see and hear the party leaders engaging in debate with each other and answering questions from the audience. The audience is a key element of the programmes and has to be seen by the viewers but there will not be undue concentration of the reactions of individual audience members.
70. There will be a close up of the questioner while he/she is asking a question.
71. There will be no close-up cutaways of a single individual audience member while the leaders are speaking.
72. However if one of the leaders directly addresses an individual audience member, a close-up shot of that individual can be shown e.g. if a leader answers a question by directly addressing the questioner.
73. There may be group shots and wide shots of the audience during the programme.
74. The programme will be confined to events inside the debate studio.
75. Breaking News straps will not be put over live coverage of the debate. On news channels (Sky News, BBC News channel), the scrolling news tickers will offer other news but will not cover breaking news lines from the debates while the debates are taking place.

76. Each party will have the right to recall the negotiating panel made up of representatives from the broadcasters and the parties, during the campaign to discuss issues arising from the debates.

**Details of selection panels**

**ITV Selection panel:**

Michael Jermey, Director of News, Current Affairs and Sport (Chair)

Sameena Ali-Khan, ITV Central regional news presenter

Alexander Gardiner, Debate Programme Editor

Lucy Meacock, ITV Granada regional news presenter

Jonathan Munro, Deputy Editor, ITV News

Alastair Stewart, Debate Moderator

Chris Wissun, Director of Programme Compliance

**Sky Selection panel**

Chris Birkett, Executive Editor, Sky News (chair)

Adam Boulton, Political Editor and Debate Moderator

Jonathan Levy, Executive Producer, Politics

John McAndrew, Executive Producer, Debate Programme

Penny Chrimes, Executive Producer, The Boulton Factor

Hannah Thomas-Peter, Politics Producer & RTS Young Journalist of the Year 2009

Daniel Austin, BSkyB Legal Department

**BBC Selection panel**

Sue English Head of Political Programmes BBC News (chair)

Ric Bailey Chief Adviser, Politics, Editorial Policy

David Dimpleby, Moderator

Daniel Pearl, Programme Editor

Jeremy Hillman, Editor Business and Economics

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