



UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS



# The 2015 Televised Election Debates **Democracy on Demand?**

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## Executive summary

The 2015 TV election debates proved their civic value – as they had in 2010.

Many voters feel entitled to be addressed by politicians as rational and independent decision-making citizens. Many of their responses and attitudes to the 2015 debates were influenced by how well or badly they considered they had been served in that regard.

In a mixed picture, age quite strongly differentiated people's responses to the debates. The expectations and assessments of younger voters were, on balance, more hopeful and positive than those of their more jaded elders.

People's images of politicians as leaders and communicators, though deep-seated and often negative, are more nuanced – laced with a degree of charitable sentiment – and less extreme than is often supposed.

The default policy position should now be that debates happen - in the 2020 election campaign certainly but also when many crucial decisions of constitutional, domestic and foreign policy are being considered in the next few years.

Such are the general conclusions that can be drawn from our research. We began it several months before the debates took place. We organised a series of focus groups in which we asked a varied range of voters and non-voters to reflect on their experience of watching or hearing about the 2010 TV election debates and then tell us what they hoped to gain from future debates. On the basis of what they told us, we identified five demands or *entitlements* that people said they needed to derive from the debates in order to perform the role of democratic citizens. These were

- They wanted to be addressed as if they were rational and independent decision-makers.
- They wanted to be able to evaluate the claims made by debaters in order to make an informed voting decision.
- They wanted to feel that they were in some way involved in the debate and spoken to by the debaters.
- They wanted to be recognised by the leaders who claimed to speak for (represent) them.
- They wanted to be able to make a difference to what happens in the political world.

We then conducted five nationally representative surveys fielded at the beginning of the election campaign, after each of the two debates, the Question Time broadcast and after Polling Day. What did we learn about the debates?

- The debates reached a broad social audience. Although those who defined themselves as being 'politically interested' were more likely to watch them, almost half of the 'not very interested' (48%) and a fifth of the 'not at all interested' tuned in.
- Over three tenths of the viewers of the first (ITV) debate said that after watching it they had become 'more interested in the election campaign' – with only six percent having become 'less interested'.

- More than 50% of viewers said they watched because they wanted to see what the parties might do if they got into power and to compare the leaders' abilities to run the country well, and a third aimed to judge which parties might work together in a coalition or some other deal.
- As many as 70% of the first-debate viewers said that they now knew 'more about what the party leaders were like' while three fifths said that they now knew 'more about some of the policies that were being put forward'. Moreover, these claimed positive outcomes were distributed more or less equally across all demographic groups (gender, age, socio-economic status and educational background).
- A majority (59%) of respondents reported speaking to other people about the first debate, with this figure rising to 70% amongst 18-24 year-olds.
- One fifth of our respondents reported going online during the first debate to talk to other people or get their views, rising to 45% amongst 18-24 year-olds.
- Half of the respondents who told us that they were undecided about how to vote watched the first (ITV) debate, about a half of whom claimed to have seen all of it.
- 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.

What did we learn about the five entitlements when they were expressed as statements for surveyed voters to respond to?

- Whether people felt that their entitlements were satisfied by what they saw and heard in the debates was invariably a highly significant determinant of their orientations to the debates.
- In the pre-debate survey, respondents were asked how confident they were that the leaders would meet each of the five entitlement statements. Expectations were low across the board, but respondents were most confident that leaders would 'put their points across in clear, understandable way' (37%) and least confident that leaders would 'prove that they understand people like me' (20%)
- The more confident that people felt about the likelihood of the debates satisfying the needs expressed by the entitlement measures, the more likely their intention to watch the first debate.
- The more that people felt that their entitlements had been satisfied in the first debate, the more likely they were to express an interest in following the rest of the campaign.
- The more people felt that their entitlements had been realised, the more charitable were their images of politicians; while to a lesser (but statistically significant) extent, when people considered that their entitlements were not realised, they regarded politicians more pejoratively.
- Many people felt more confident that their entitlements as democratic citizens were being met after watching the debates than they had expected to be before watching them.
- But there were significant differences between entitlement statements. The statement that voters had a real choice and could therefore make a difference with their votes increased between the pre-debate and post-election surveys by 24%; the statement about the leaders being 'direct and understandable' increased by 14%; the statement that the debaters 'understand people like me' increased by 9%.

People's images of what politicians are like were tapped by presenting voters with a series of four pejorative and four charitable statements, in response to which they could record their degrees of agreement or disagreement. We learned that:

- On balance British voters are more negatively than positively disposed to politicians
- Their pejorative attitudes are counter-balanced to some extent by more charitable views.
- Only minorities — between a fifth and a third of the electorate — 'strongly' agreed that politicians are typically hypocritical, out of touch, out for themselves and unreliable.

Although people derived more from their debate-viewing experience than they thought they would, this did not change their view of politicians. British electors' images of politicians after the campaign were virtually identical with those which they had held before the campaign began. A relatively favourable impression of the debates and the participating leaders seems to have been a rather bounded effect of exposure to them without any noticeable impact on what seem to be more firmly fixed ideas about politicians as such.

The findings we have presented show that the 2015 TV election debates performed a crucially important civic role, reaching sections of the population least likely to be touched by the rest of the campaign; helping citizens to acquire the information they need to make meaningful choices; and thereby boosting the electorate's confidence. Whatever their strategic effects might have been in terms of inter-party competition, the debates served democratic citizenship. In the concluding chapter of this report we set out several implications of our findings, one of which is that the default assumption should now be that debates happen. The next UK general election will be in 2020. The Conservative, Labour and Liberal Democrat parties (and maybe others) will each be led into that campaign by different leaders from those who participated in the 2015 debates. It would be helpful if every party leader could make a public commitment to taking part in TV debates in 2020.



# Chapter 1 – Debates and Democratic Demand

The research presented in this study addressed two key questions: What did voters want and expect from the TV election debates in 2015? How did voters evaluate the debates in terms of their needs as democratic citizens? It was not the purpose of this study to consider which leaders or parties came out best from the debates; there was no shortage of instant polling generated during and around the debates, the value of which we shall leave others to judge.

Why these two research questions? TV election debates perform two functions: supply and demand. In terms of supply, they offer an opportunity for party leaders to tell potential voters how they differ from one another on matters of policy and principle; what kind of people they are; and how casting a vote for them would make a difference. In short, the debates provide a window for comparison between competing approaches to governing the country. In terms of demand, citizens look to the debates to provide them with resources for carrying out their role as informed and reflective citizens of a representative democracy.

Most of the planning - and sometimes conflict - around TV election debates focuses upon the supply side. Party communication strategists and broadcasters negotiate with one another with a view to providing a media event that will allow each to present what they consider the voters need. If, after the first ever TV election debates in 2010, anyone believed that the question of whether and in what form future debates should happen was settled, the lead-up to the 2015 general election gave them good reason to think again. The party strategists clearly had their own ideas about when the debates should take place and who should be included. The Prime Minister argued that three TV debates had *'sucked the life'* out of the 2010 campaign and wanted them to take place in 2015 *before* the beginning of the official campaign period. The Labour Party criticised the Prime Minister for refusing to debate head-to-head with its leader. The Liberal Democrat leader and Deputy Prime Minister demanded an equal right to appear in all the debates. The UK Independence Party, with a higher poll rating than the Liberal Democrats, insisted that it should be included in the debates. The Prime Minister stated that *'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'*. At the same time, the broadcasters came up with more than one proposal for a series of debates, each including different combinations of leaders. When it seemed at one point as if some broadcasters might be prepared to proceed with the debates even if certain leaders refused to participate, former Chair of the BBC Governors, Lord Grade, reminded them that they were *'guardians of democracy'* and that they appeared to have *'grossly inflated and misguided ideas of their own importance'*. It is not the purpose of this study to suggest whether or how the debate negotiations could have been handled differently. But it seems reasonable to conclude that, on the supply side, the organisation of TV election debates tends to be shaped strategically: by politicians who will only take part if they are convinced that the terms of engagement favour them; and by broadcasters who have their own ideas about what makes 'good television'.

On the demand side, there seemed to be general agreement that citizens *deserved* to witness TV debates: *'I want these TV debates to happen because I think the British public deserves it'* (Ed Miliband, Sky News, 4.3.15); *'Voters across the UK have a right to hear how we would use ... influence if we had it'* (Nicola Sturgeon, STV News, 14.1.15); *'Public deserve proper #TVdebates but now fobbed off'* (Nigel Farage, 20.3.15); *'our research has shown that there is a public desire and a*

*public expectation for debates in 2015'* (letter from the broadcasters to Craig Oliver, Director of Communications for Prime Minister David Cameron, 6.3.15). But what was it that citizens themselves hoped to gain from the debates? And how, if at all, could such demand be used as a basis for appraising the democratic value of these media events?

With a view to answering these questions, we conducted twelve focus groups in which we asked a varied range of voters and non-voters<sup>1</sup> to reflect on their experience of watching or hearing about the 2010 TV election debates and talk about what they hoped to gain from future debates (Coleman & Moss, 2015). Much of the previous (mainly American) research on debate outcomes has taken for granted the nature of the demand that these events are supposed to satisfy. The common assumption has been that their purpose is to educate voters; to encourage them to vote by providing them with appropriate political knowledge. Wald and Lupfer's (1978) widely-cited article, 'The Presidential Debate as a Civics Lesson', captures the somewhat paternalistic sense in which viewers were expected to conform to supply-driven notions of 'what voters need to know'.

In our research, we decided to adopt a different approach to understanding voters' information needs. Rather than pre-defining our own list of positive debate outcomes, we wanted to find out how people thought the debates could help them to function more effectively as democratic citizens. Drawing upon important theoretical insights from Amartya Sen (1973, 1992 and 2009), Helen Nussbaum (2011) and Nicholas Garnham (1997), which we have discussed elsewhere (Coleman & Moss, 2015), we began by acknowledging that the work of being an attentive, reflective and active citizen is far from easy; that people's capacity to follow, relate to and make sense of political information varies across a wide range of social situations; and that the best way to understand information needs would be to focus on the range of democratic entitlements that citizens would like TV debates (as part of the wider political communication ecology) to help them realise. Consequently, our focus group discussions set out to discover what TV election debates would be like if they were designed from the perspective of citizens rather than that of political elites.

Inviting focus-group participants to think beyond the constraints of the current realities of political communication and imagine what TV debates could and should be like - and to do so deliberatively (reflecting on the views of others as well as their own with a view to enlarging and revising their original perspectives) – proved to be an important step towards understanding the demand side of electoral democracy.

### **1.1 What voters wanted from the debates**

When we asked focus-group participants to recall their impressions of the TV prime ministerial debates that took place in the run-up to the 2010 general election, their responses broadly confirmed the findings from the five audience surveys that we conducted at that time. Approximately two-thirds of the 2010 survey respondents had said then that they learnt something new from the debates; three-quarters felt that they knew more about 'the qualities of the party leaders' after seeing the debates; and as many as 70% felt that they knew more 'about the policies of each party'. Eighty seven percent of survey respondents reported talking about the debates with others – and this increased to 92% amongst younger voters (Coleman, 2011). Recalling those first-ever British TV election debates, people spoke of how they liked the idea of being able to see all the main party leaders on one platform, making their pitches to the electorate and forced to explain how and why they disagreed with one another. As one participant put it, *'It just jammed all the debate between the parties into one convenient viewing rather than having to*

*get sources from all over the place*. To many people, it somehow felt more directly accountable to them. Others spoke of how they had followed comments on Twitter as they watched the 2010 debates, leaving them feeling more like a public than a merely spectating audience. Again and again, our focus-group participants characterised the debates as moments in which would-be national leaders had to prove their worth to the public. As one politically disengaged male put it, *'They want to run the country, so if you go for an interview you get asked questions and you have to answer them'*. *'Ultimately, it should be the hardest job interview that they've ever had to sit, and they should have to demonstrate their credentials to you'* said a female committed party supporter. As people talked to us about their impressions of the previous debates and their expectations for the next ones it became clear that they felt entitled to witness these media events on terms determined by them. Just as a job interview would be rather pointless if the interviewer was unable to ask searching questions or comprehend the answers given, so people wanted TV debates to afford them opportunities to make the best political choice that they could. In short, they felt entitled, as citizens of a democracy, not only to be provided with debates to watch, but to be able to make sense of and act upon them.

Across all twelve of our focus groups, with remarkably little variation between different types of voters and non-voters, five demands (or entitlements) emerged and are summarised below. Of course, we do not claim that the entitlements as we have formulated them are a) clearly distinct from one another (often they are getting at the same demand from different angles), b) perfect reflections of what focus group participants said to us (all research entails sensitive acts of interpretation) or c) exhaustive (further research might uncover other aspects of civic demand). Nonetheless, the *entitlements* outlined below, and tested in our surveys, constitute an innovative attempt to understand what people feel they need in order to perform the role of democratic citizens.

### **1. People wanted to be addressed as if they were rational and independent decision-makers.**

The people in our focus groups were not naïve. They were well aware that political leaders took part in TV debates with the aim of persuading a mass audience to support them. But they drew a line in their minds between persuasion and manipulation. The former entails being urged to support a particular outcome; the latter involves the use of language that is less than transparent to promote outcomes that are not clearly identified. The opening lines of Robin Lakoff's (1990:1) excellent book, *Talking Power*, summed up the predicament that many voters believed they faced: *'We feel ourselves at the mercy of language and its manipulators, the slick professionals ... who use it with cynical skill to entice us, innocent amateurs, into their webs of words'*.

In their evaluation of the debates, participants returned repeatedly to their concerns about being addressed by political leaders in ways that appeared designed to hoodwink and confuse them. They felt that political leaders used language strategically, to secure electoral success, rather than communicatively, to promote reasoned discussion and shared understanding (Habermas 1987). *'You kind of watch it and you're sort of thinking it's a bit of a waste of time because they don't actually give a genuine answer'* said a female first-time voter. A disengaged female voter complained that *'Everything they say is really well vetted and written by people'* and another woman in the same group urged the debaters to *'Just be human instead of this little machine that's been programmed'*.

This first demand was essentially ethical: by all means do your best to win us over to your side, but please treat us as people capable of rational, independent judgement.

## **2. People wanted to be able to evaluate the claims made by debaters in order to make an informed voting decision.**

Beyond the debate performances, how are potential voters to decide which claims are credible and which are not? While the arguments between leaders helped some viewers to make up their minds about who or what was right, many felt that they lacked sufficient information with which to understand and evaluate competing political claims. Participants in our focus groups wanted ways of challenging or correcting claims that they considered to be false or unproven. They wanted ways of evaluating the congruence between what each of the debaters said they stood for and their record in acting upon their professed commitments. Time and again, we heard people asking three questions:

- i) What did claims made in the debates mean?
- ii) How factually valid were claims made in the debates and how consistent with the leaders' political records when in office?
- iii) To what extent do arguments made in the debates (both by and between individual speakers) add up to a coherent plan for governing the country?

For several people, a key demand was to be spoken to in terms that they could comprehend. As one female put it,

*People talk about fiscal things and I honestly couldn't tell you what they were. It's more the certain words they use. Rather than putting a label on something and expecting everybody to know what it is, just say 'Okay, so this is the idea. This is what we want to change about ... this thing'. Give it a broader term so that all of a sudden you're not just reaching people that understand that word. You're telling people who might not understand what it means. And all of a sudden it might mean something to them. They go 'Actually, I've never realised that affects me because I didn't know what it was'.*

Some people wanted an app or web resource that would *'bullet-point what they have said they're going to do. When they previously went into power, what they said they were going to do and where they are at with that now'* (disengaged female voter). While some people hoped that connecting with other voters online to elicit their views on the veracity of what the debaters were saying could be helpful, many more were sceptical about the value of instantaneous, popular evaluation. Some wanted a range of relevant background information, fact checks and argument visualisations to be made available via the 'red button' on televisions or via a dedicated app or website. Regardless of the merits and practicalities of such clarifying and fact-checking technologies, we sensed an underlying desire for access to more than competing assertions and claims.

## **3. People wanted to feel that they were in some way involved in the debate**

As one undecided female voter put it, the debates needed *'a bit more informality ... rather than them being up here and the audience being down here, a bit more of an even level'*. A male advanced user of digital technologies expressed a common view that the debaters should remember that most people watching are not political insiders: *'I'd ... like to see more engagement with the sort of general population, because not everybody is as politically minded as some people. So you've got to appeal to everybody I think'*. This concern was well articulated by a female advanced digital technology user who said that it felt to her *'like they were having personal conversations between each other rather than explaining to the audience what they were talking*

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*about ... it were like almost a personal joke, if you can use that term, like between themselves and you couldn't really get into it'.*

The challenge of making election debates less of a spectacle and more inviting to people used to being part of a participatory media ecology is a tough one. One consortium of media partners in the run-up to the 2015 election proposed that the debates should take place on an online platform, allowing for more participatory interaction between the audience and the debaters (although they did not say much about how this would be different from the digital add-ons already being used by the broadcasters). However this entitlement to feel involved is to be realised, it is likely to have less to do with technology than creative ways of enabling citizens to feel that political discourse is more than an experience of being spoken at.

#### **4. People wanted to be recognised by the leaders who claimed to speak for (represent) them**

Participants in our focus groups were overwhelmingly sceptical about the extent to which political leaders could relate to the lives, values and preferences of 'ordinary' people. As one female party supporter put it, *'I need to know from the things that they say, the way that they say it and the way that they present themselves, that they do have a clue about the average people living in an average house in an average street in the middle of England'*. This, of course, is not confined to debates; there is a widespread sense amongst voters that 'the political class' as a whole has lost touch with them; forgotten how to speak to them; and needs to receive a sharp reminder of who they are actually representing.

A popular proposal in our focus groups was to invite members of the public to produce short videos about their lives and social challenges. After seeing these films, the political leaders would be asked to say how a government led by them could affect the life challenges and prospects of that individual person and, of course, people like them:

*The video of people's lives is a really good idea because they'd have to consider sort of a real situation and sort of think about how they could help that person and give an honest answer to that rather than just twisting the question in a way that it makes a bit easier for them to answer (female, first-time voter).*

While this proposal is unlikely to be incorporated into any of the debate formats that have been adopted so far, it does point to the possibility of expanding future election debates into a more ongoing interaction between citizens and their would-be representatives. For us, the main significance of public enthusiasm for a proposal of this kind was that it reflected people's concern for their own experiences to be recognised and addressed by the debaters.

#### **5. People wanted to be able to make a difference to what happens in the political world**

Voting is the most common act of democratic citizenship, but its power rests on the availability of meaningful political choice. Several focus group participants felt that the consequences of voting one way or the other were unclear, as the debating political leaders would be reluctant to discuss bolder policy proposals that might prove controversial. They wanted to know more about what the effects of policies would be upon different sections of the population. And they wanted to feel confident that voting for any of the choices on offer would lead to some kind of change. We wanted to explore the extent to which watching the election debates made any difference to people's confidence in the efficacy of their vote – and the electorate's overall decision.

## 1.2 Asking the right questions

There were four programmes that resulted from the broadcasters discussions with the parties about debates:

- A Sky/Channel 4 programme broadcast on 26th March which featured interviews with David Cameron and Ed Miliband and which saw members of a studio audience question them separately. The leaders did not appear together or debate with each other.
- A seven-party leaders' debate produced and broadcast on 2nd April by ITV. This was the only programme featuring a full debate between leaders of all the main parties.
- A five-party leaders' debate (not including David Cameron or Nick Clegg) produced and broadcast by the BBC on 16th April.
- A special edition of the BBC's Question Time broadcast on 30th April which saw David Cameron, Ed Miliband and Nick Clegg answer questions put by a studio audience. They appeared separately from each other and there was no debate between them.

The research reported here covers the three programmes that took place during the formal campaign period starting on 30th March. It deals extensively with voters' and viewers' responses to the debate produced by ITV before and after its screening on 2nd April; covers certain core responses to the next two programmes; and presents a more full slate of questions to respondents after Polling Day. Although strictly speaking the Question Time broadcast was not a 'debate', we refer for ease of wording to the transmission of 'three debates' throughout the rest of this report.

Working with the polling company ComRes, we conducted five nationally representative surveys of approximately 2,000 eligible voters each time: at the beginning of the election campaign; after the ITV debate on 2 April, after the BBC Challengers' Debate on 16 April, after the BBC Question Time programme on 30 April and after polling day.<sup>2</sup>

We began by asking respondents to tell us how interested they considered themselves to be in politics and followed this with a range of questions designed to elicit why they planned to watch the first (ITV) debate (if they did) and why they might choose to avoid it (if they would). After the debate we asked people whether they had watched it; how long they had watched for; who they talked with about what they saw; and the extent to which their debate-viewing was combined with any online activities. We also asked whether they had learned anything about British politics from watching the debate. In our final survey we were able to investigate whether respondents considered they had got what they hoped for from the debates – and how debate-watching compared with other sources of campaign information from that point of view.

The 'uses and gratifications' questions enabled us to gain a nuanced picture of the varying reasons people had for engaging with the debates, but they did not tell us what lay behind those reasons. For example, a person might avoid the debates because they see no point in watching politicians squabbling with one another, but that does not tell us what kind of capabilities or resources would help them to feel more confident and informed as a voter. It is here that the entitlements that emerged from our earlier research (discussed above) could help us to elicit valuable insights into the underlying beliefs upon which subjective judgements are founded.

Questions relating to each of the five entitlements were central to our surveys and, as will become clear in the next chapter, proved to be highly significant in explaining how people responded to the debates. Shortly before the 7-leader encounter, we asked everyone, 'How confident, if at all, are you that the leaders taking part in the debate will do each of the following':

- Put their points across in a clear, understandable way
- Provide factual evidence to support the points they make
- Engage me in the debate
- Prove that they understand people like me
- Provide me clear choices to vote for

Reply options were very confident, fairly confident, not very confident, and not at all confident. Then, in four subsequent polls we asked, 'To what extent, if at all, do you agree with each of the following statements' (worded similarly to the pre-campaign items, e.g. 'The leaders argued their case in a direct and understandable way').<sup>3</sup> Reply options were strongly agree, tend to agree, tend to disagree and strongly disagree.

We did not wish, however, to gather this evidence in isolation from the more general climate of voters' attitudes to British politicians as leaders and communicators. In the run-up to the 2015 election some journalists – often supported by vox pop interviews with angry citizens – seemed to concur with the then BBC Political Editor's reflection that, 'An alarmingly high proportion of the voters I talk to tell me either that they stopped believing politicians made any difference to their lives a long time ago, or that they're as mad as hell and not going to take this any more'. We were interested to learn how broadly these sentiments are held and the extent to which they might be rather more nuanced than the popular account suggested. We therefore included in the first and last of our surveys a series of four negative or pejorative statements about politicians and four positive or charitable statements about them.<sup>4</sup>

Findings from all of these questions are set out in the next chapter. In chapter 3 Nick Anstead examines how the TV debates played out in social media. And in chapter 4 we draw a number of implications of our study for future research, future TV election debates and democratic political communication more generally.

1. The groups comprised the following categories:

1. Disengaged Females - mainly non-voters and not interested in politics
2. Disengaged Males - mainly non-voters and not interested in politics
3. Committed Female Party Supporters
4. Committed Male Party Supporters
5. Undecided Female Voters
6. Undecided Male Voters
7. First-time Female Voters
8. First-time Male Voters
9. Male Advanced Digital Technology Users
10. Female Advanced Digital Technology Users
11. Female Performers
12. Male Performers

The inclusion of the final two groups was because we were particularly interested in their observations on the performative and rhetorical strategies adopted by political leaders in the debates.

2. Only the pre-debate, post-ITV debate and post-election surveys included a full range of questions; our third and fourth surveys comprised a limited set of questions relating mainly to the five entitlement measures. We decided to run our most extensive post-debate survey after the ITV debate because that was the one in which a broad range of party leaders took part and, following past precedent in the 2010 campaign and in US presidential debates, was likely to be watched by the largest number of voters. We also acknowledge that there were several other debate-type formats during the 2015 election campaign, including ones run by Sky and Channel 4, BBC3, the BBC Daily Politics programme and regional channels.

3. For the third entitlement, we changed the wording from 'engage me in the debate' in the pre-debate survey to 'seemed to be talking to me' in the post-debate surveys. Both of these statements capture important aspects of the entitlement. However, given the different way the questions are formulated, the responses to questions related to this entitlement across the surveys are less comparable than the others.

4. The pejorative statements about politicians' images were:

- Politicians are frequently hypocritical
- Politicians don't know what is happening in the real world
- Politicians put their own interests ahead of their constituents' interests
- Politicians never keep their promises

The charitable statements were:

- Politicians don't get enough credit for the good things they do
- Politicians want what is best for the country
- Politicians should not be judged by higher standards than ordinary people
- Politicians are sincere about their principles



## Chapter 2 - What Did We Learn?

Our research on voters' responses to the three party leader debates of 2010 underscored their civic potential and value. Can the same be said of their 2015 successors? This question needs to be asked, since the 2015 and 2010 debates packages were so different from each other. Whereas the 2010 broadcasts, billed as Prime Ministerial debates, featured the same three leaders throughout – Brown, Cameron and Clegg – a larger and more diverse cast of characters took part in the 2015 events, none of which involved 'head-to-head' encounters between potential Prime Ministers. Reflecting the emergence of a more fragmented party system, participating leaders ranged well beyond 2010's threesome to include Nigel Farage (UKIP), Nicola Sturgeon (SNP), Natalie Bennett (Greens) and Leanne Wood (Plaid Cymru). Whereas the 2010 debates had dominated its short three and a half-week campaign, during 2015's twice-as-long (five-week) campaign, voters were exposed to far more daily news from the parties' out-of-debate promises, pledges and pronouncements and broadcasters' daily commentaries, plus numerous interviews with party spokespeople. With the loss of the 2010 events' novelty value and some deepening since then of public disenchantment with politics, politicians and political discourse, there was the possibility that voters would regard the 2015 exercises more sceptically than before.

In this chapter, we evaluate the democratic value of the 2015 election debates. To do so, we emphasise the five key demands – or *entitlements* – that we argued in our introduction viewers expect election debates and those involved in them to meet. In Section 2.1, we will describe how and in what ways the debates mattered to viewers. In Section 2.2, we explain why the entitlements were important in particular and how they affected the way viewers related to the debates and the election campaign. Finally, in Section 2.3, we consider how voters view politicians and whether the debates had any positive or negative impact on these perceptions.

### 2.1 Did the debates matter and, if so, how and for whom?

The 2015 debates did attract somewhat fewer viewers than did the 2010 ones. On both occasions, the first debate was the biggest draw. In 2010 it attracted 9.4 million viewers (37% audience share), falling off to 4.1 million viewers (17% audience share) for the second debate but bouncing back to 8.4 million viewers (32% audience share) for the last one (Dean 2010); while in 2015 the first debate was watched by 7.3 million viewers (28.5% audience share) (S. Scholes personal communication, 16 Nov 2015) and the second debate by 4.3 million viewers (21% audience share) (Plunkett 2015). Nevertheless, despite the changes of debate presentation and audience attention, the 2015 debates were, according to our research, once again a force for civic involvement in many important ways.

The 2015 debates mattered, first of all, for their unique reach, almost society-wide, not just for the most politically interested. It is true that people's professed levels of interest in politics strongly predicted their intentions ('definitely' or 'probably') to watch the first debate. But even so, as many as 43% of those 'not very interested' in politics felt inclined to see it.

**TABLE 2.1**

*Do you think you will watch the debate on Thursday evening?*

	<i>Very interested in politics %</i>	<i>Fairly interested interested %</i>	<i>Not very interested %</i>	<i>Not at all %</i>
Yes, definitely	63	30	10	4
Yes, probably	24	46	33	8
No, probably not	9	18	43	28
No, definitely not	4	7	14	61

It is also true that political interest levels were closely associated with actual viewing of the first (ITV) debate, 87% of the ‘very interested’, 72% of the ‘fairly interested’, almost half of the ‘not very interested’ (48%) but only a fifth of the ‘not at all interested’ having done so. Once they had tuned in to that debate, however, a majority of the viewers (58%) said they had stayed with it to the very end, including nearly two fifths (38%) of the ‘not very’ politically interested. And just over three tenths of the viewers of the first debate said that after watching it they had become ‘more interested in the election campaign’ – with only six percent having become ‘less interested’.

Table 2.2 illustrates a particularly important contribution of the 2015 debates. Apparently they satisfied many viewers’ demands more than was originally expected. In chapter 1, we described five key entitlements that citizens wanted TV debates and the leaders who participated in them to provide. Summing our respondents’ assessments of how the debates might (before the first debate) and did (after each debate) meet the entitlement statements<sup>1</sup>, the table shows how relatively low levels of confidence in entitlement realisation were boosted by more positive verdicts on their delivery after each of the debates. Experience of the debates, then, had greatly exceeded prior confidence, especially for provision by the leaders of direct and understandable statements and for offering a real choice. A comparison of the pre-debate and post-election surveys shows that estimations of having a real choice had increased by 24% and agreement with the statement about the leaders being direct and understandable increased by 14%. The respondents reported no such improvement, however, in their low expectation of being engaged or talked to on their own terms.

**TABLE 2.2**

*Agreement (‘strongly’ and ‘tend to’ agree) with assessments of citizen entitlements*

	Pre-campaign	Debates: 1	2	3	Post-election
Direct, understandable statements	37%	54%	52%	57%	51%
Factual evidence	23%	34%	36%	37%	38%
Engaged/talked to me	29%	28%	30%	34%	28%
Proved understood people like me	20%	27%	34%	34%	29%
Offered clear choice	29%	52%	51%	52%	53%

At least equally important is the fact that the increases from the pre-campaign to the post-debate surveys were highest among those voters who were least interested in politics. Tables 2.3 and 2.4 show these trends of response to the two most boosted entitlement statements across the campaign period.

**TABLE 2.3**

*Percentages of survey respondents who (1) were confident that leaders would ‘put their points across in a clear, understandable way’ in the pre-debate survey and (2) agreed that the leaders ‘argued their case in a direct and understandable way’ in the post debate and post election surveys*

	Pre-debate survey	Post first debate survey	Post election survey	Average Response (Post debate surveys)	Percentage improvement (from pre-debate to post debate surveys)
Very interested in politics	46.9%	58.4%	56.8%	57.6%	+10.7
Fairly interested in politics	45%	56.1%	50.9%	53.5%	+8.5
Not very interested in politics	30.3%	43.5%	46.1%	44.8%	+14.5
Not at all interested in politics	8.6%	28.9%	25.7%	27.3%	+18.7

**TABLE 2.4**

*Percentages of survey respondents who (1) were confident that leaders would ‘provide me clear choices to vote for’ in the pre-debate survey and (2) agreed with the statement ‘I feel more confident that I have a real choice at this election’ in the post debate and post election surveys*

	Pre-debate survey	Post first debate survey	Post election survey	Average Response (Post debate surveys)	Percentage improvement (from pre-debate to post debate surveys)
Very interested in politics	47%	58.5%	61.7%	60.1%	+13.1
Fairly interested in politics	35.6%	55.9%	52.7%	54.3%	+18.7
Not very interested in politics	16.4%	35%	41.2%	38.1%	+21.7
Not at all interested in politics	5.7%	35.1%	16.7%	25.9%	+20.2

It was among the ‘not very’ and ‘not at all’ politically interested viewers that quite large improvements in evaluations of the entitlements were registered. The special significance of leader debates for enhancing the involvement of less politically minded citizens is strongly emphasised by this 2015 finding. A similar though less sizeable development in evaluations of the entitlements occurred among female voters.

Why did so many viewers watch the debates, even sticking to them to the very end? What did they hope to gain from doing so? Our evidence suggests that many voters wanted to learn something of ‘substance’ from the debaters’ statements and exchanges – a concern that mainstream communicators sometimes find difficult to grasp. The point is illustrated by Table 2.5, which shows the percentages of responses to a check-list of possible reasons for watching the first debate by those who said they definitely or probably would do so.

**TABLE 2.5***Intentions to watch the first (ITV) debate in order to:*

See what the parties would do if they got into power	57%
Compare the leaders' abilities to run the country well	51%
Judge which parties might work together in a coalition or some other deal	33%
Help make up my mind how to vote	31%
Understand the problems facing the country better	29%
Remind me of my side's strong points	24%
For ammunition in arguments with other people	14%
Help me decide whether to vote	13%
Pick the winner of the debate	12%
Because everyone else will be watching it	8%

Thus, majorities wanted to see what the parties might do if they got into power and to compare the leaders' abilities to run the country well, and a third aimed to judge which parties might work together in a coalition or some other deal. Moreover, these concerns for enhanced surveillance of the political scene were shared across the societal board – without regard to differences of gender, age, socio-economic status or educational background. In a marked contrast, those planning to watch 'to pick the winner of the debate' was way down this motivational totem pole, ranked ninth out of the ten proffered reasons for watching the debate.

A few differences from our 2010 findings on this point are worth noting. In 2015 appreciably fewer debate viewers than in 2010 were concerned to understand the country's problems better – perhaps because those problems had been rammed home so heavily and persistently after the financial crash. And whereas in 2010 more debate viewers had wanted to be reminded of their side's strong points than were seeking help in deciding how to vote, by 2015 the order had been reversed, there being more 'vote-guidance seekers' than 'reinforcement seekers' among the citizens of that year.

But what about the nearly two fifths (39%) of the electorate who did *not* intend to tune in to the first (ITV) debate? Why were they disinclined to do so? Table 2.6 presents their responses to a check-list of 'reasons why you might not watch' that debate.

**TABLE 2.6***No intention to watch the first debate because: :*

You can't trust what politicians say on television	38%
They'll argue with each other too much	33%
They'll have little new to say	29%
I'm not much interested in politics	28%
I prefer to relax when watching television	27%
My mind is already made up	22%
Debates exaggerate the importance of party leaders	19%
They will just talk down to me	7%
It could be very confusing	7%

Evidently, the three most off-putting features of expected politician-speak were its likely untrustworthiness, negativity and staleness. It is important to point out that when in 2010 a similar check-list was presented to all survey respondents, the same three unappetizing features emerged as 'the greatest source of apprehension in viewers' minds when contemplating the upcoming prime ministerial debates' (Coleman, 2011: 40).

Taken together, Tables 2.5 and 2.6 highlight an important feature of the electoral audience's outlook on political communication: its essential *ambivalence*. It seems that many people can be both attracted by ways in which the media might serve their political needs and repelled by elements that seem endemic to the existing system of political communication. If so, whether voters' entitlements seem to them to have been delivered (or not) could influence their willingness to engage in mainstream politics more generally (or not).

Did the viewers of the first (ITV) debate consider that they had acquired some of those insights into British politics which they had hoped to gain from watching it? The answer is predominantly affirmative. Despite the appearance of seven party leaders on the podium, seven tenths of the viewers denied that they had found the debate 'confusing' (against 22% who did); two thirds denied that it had 'turned me off', and 53% disagreed that it had left them 'none the wiser'. Nearly a third said that as a result of watching the debate, they had become 'more interested in the campaign' - a proportion that rose to nearly a half of the 18-34 year-old respondents - with only 6% of viewers saying they had become 'less interested'. And as many as seven tenths of the first-debate viewers said that they now knew 'more about what the party leaders were like' while three fifths said that they now knew 'more about some of the policies that were being put forward'. Moreover, this was a society-wide experience, these claimed positive outcomes having been distributed more or less equally across all demographic groups (gender, age, socio-economic status and educational background). This suggests that, as in 2010, exposure to the debates was for many voters something of a learning experience - not necessarily to acquire detailed knowledge of party policies but to improve their understanding of what broadly the competing parties stood for and of what their leaders were like. Understandably at this stage of the campaign, fewer viewers of the first debate had formed 'a clearer idea of which parties might work together in a coalition or some other deal after the election' - 43% having agreed and 41% having disagreed with that statement.

**Younger (and Older) Voters and the Debates**

A conclusion of our 2010 research, which was derived from a number of empirical findings, was that ‘by and large, the youngest voters...seemed almost to have formed a special relationship with the prime ministerial debates’ (Coleman, 2011: 43). But was their previous involvement a one-off or a more abiding reaction? What did younger voters feel ‘entitled’ to expect from the debaters in 2015? How might their patterns of response be explained?

As a matter of empirical fact, among our breakdown variables, respondent’s age was usually more predictive of people’s orientations to the debates and the debaters than any other demographic factor– far more so than for gender, socio-economic status or educational background. On average, older voters claimed to be more interested in politics than younger ones – 75% of those aged 65 and older describing themselves as at least ‘fairly interested’ in politics compared with 50% of the 18-24 year-olds. But age did not seem to have affected people’s intentions to watch the first debate: younger voters were no less interested in seeing it than were their elders. And those first-time electors who intended to watch the first debate gave more reasons for doing so than the older electors did – an average of 3.0 endorsed by the 18-24 year-olds compared with 2.8 by the 65+ age group. Although a slightly larger proportion of the older viewers hoped to learn more about party policies and the leaders’ abilities (63% and 60% compared with 57% and 51% in the sample as a whole), the youngest voters were most desirous of understanding ‘the problems the country faces better’ (37% compared with 29% for the whole sample). And there was a decided age gradient from the youngest to the oldest respondents in wanting help from the first debate to ‘make up my mind how to vote’:

*Age Group*

18-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65+
51%	38%	32%	24%	28%	25%

Remarkably, the older voters endorsed many more reasons for avoiding the first debate than did younger ones – 3.2 on average by those aged 65 and over compared with only 1.5 among first-time voters!

What about actual viewing of the first debate? Here are the figures for our youngest and oldest respondents:

	<i>18-24 year olds</i>	<i>65+</i>
	%	%
Saw all	27	46
some	34	28
none	39	26

About three quarters of the older voters saw the first debate, then, compared with three fifths of the first-time voters, and many more of the former watched all of it. On the other hand, younger voters were just as likely as older ones to have said that after seeing the first debate they had learned more about ‘what the party leaders were like’ and about ‘some of the policies that were being put forward’ by the parties. More of them thought that the debate had given them ‘a clearer idea’ about future coalition- and deal-making prospects (just over a half of the 18-24 year-olds compared with only 34% of those aged 65 and older).

The most striking differences between the age groups emerged, however, when the survey respondents were asked before and after watching the debates about the leaders' abilities to meet their demands as democratic citizens. It is true that more 18-24 year-olds than other respondents initially answered 'don't know' when asked about this, but those numbers declined as the campaign proceeded:

*Range of 'don't know' answers by 18-24 year-olds across five entitlement measures*

Pre-campaign	After 7-leader debate	After 5-leader debate	After Question Time	After Polling
15-17%	11-14%	4-10%	8-12%	6-8%

And over and over, with few exceptions, younger voters' assessments of the leaders' likely or actual delivery of the 'entitlements' we have set out earlier were more positive than were those of older voters, on some points by sizeable margins. For example, before the first debate the percentages of 18-24 year-old and 65+ respondents, who said they were 'not very' or 'not at all' confident that they would be properly served, differed as shown below (typically increasing step-by-step across the intervening age groups):

	18-24	65+
Direct understandable statements	47%	61%
Provide factual evidence	63%	70%
Engage me in debate	49%	70%
Understand people like me	61%	80%
Offer a clear choice	51%	68%

The same age difference emerged when people were asked after each of the debates to assess how well the debaters had satisfied the entitlements:

**TABLE 2.7**

*Percentages of 18-24 and 65+ age groups agreeing strongly or tending to agree*

	<i>7-leader debate</i>		<i>5-leader debate</i>		<i>Question Time</i>	
	18-24	65+	18-24	65+	18-24	64+
Direct, understandable statements	54%	55%	55%	42%	61%	58%
Give factual evidence	44%	29%	46%	24%	50%	28%
Talked to people like me	38%	21%	35%	16%	45%	31%
Understood people like me	39%	17%	45%	21%	39%	25%
Offered a real choice	54%	49%	58%	46%	56%	60%

The lower regard of older voters for politicians as communicators, shown in this and many of our other analyses, is no statistical fluke. It replicates our finding in 2010 that 'the older voters seemed less enamoured of the debates and less positive about political communication in general'

(Coleman, 2011: 47). Several possible explanations of this enduring pattern have occurred to us. First, older voters are more exposed to the mainstream media where the more off-putting characteristics of conventional political communication are most prevalent (e.g. spin, sound bites, gamesmanship, knocking copy, etc.). Secondly, older voters may have become increasingly jaded with political talk over time, as if they had ‘seen’ – or rather ‘heard’ - it all before! Thirdly, an influence of generational experience may have been in play here. That is, older people, who will have entered the electoral audience at a time when hopes of television as an informing and democratizing medium were quite high (cf. Blumler and McQuail, 1968; Gurevitch et al, 2009), may have become disillusioned by a gradual dashing of those expectations.

**Talk with others**

Election debates are social occasions which are shared with others. The debates provide a common political talking point among people and an opportunity for them to exchange views with each other about the leaders, the parties and their policies. The fact that debates can carve out what might be rare space for some people to discuss politics with friends, family members and others is a crucial aspect of their democratic value.

In our study of the 2010 debates, we found that 87% of survey respondents reported talking about the debates with others, including 92% among the younger age group (Coleman, 2011:4). Our figures for the 2015 study are not strictly comparable, since in this study we only asked this question after the first debate. Nonetheless, 59% of respondents reported speaking to other people, suggesting that the debates again played an important role in sparking discussion. Like 2010, the figure is higher for the younger age group, with 70% of 18-24 year olds reporting that they spoke to other people after the debate.

**TABLE 2.8**

*‘Did you talk to other people about the debate after you had watched it?’*

	18-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65+	Total
Yes, I did	70%	68%	66%	54%	53%	49%	59%
No, I did not	30%	32%	34%	46%	47%	51%	41%

Meanwhile, one fifth of our respondents reported going online during the first debate to talk to other people or get their views, indicating the role that social media play in facilitating discussion around the debates. As we might expect, the percentages of those going online during the debate is highest among the younger age groups: whereas 5% of those aged 65+ went online, 45% of 18-24 year olds reported doing so.

**TABLE 2.9**

*‘During the debate did you go online to talk or get others’ views about the debate?’*

	18-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65+	Total
Yes, I did	45%	41%	31%	10%	6%	5%	20%
No, I did not	55%	59%	69%	90%	94%	95%	80%

Who did viewers who spoke to other people after the debate talk to? A significant percentage of respondents discussed the debates with friends (37%) and work colleagues (10%), but the most common group by some margin were members of the family (79%). This is true across all age groups. The fact that 18-24 year-olds talked about the debate more often with family members than with their friends seems to suggest a) that when an event becomes a media event it is still, as was the case in the past, a family event; and that b) many young adults are not necessarily quite so detached from their family members in favour of sociability with their peers as is sometimes supposed.

**TABLE 2.10**

*'Who did you talk to about the debate afterwards?'*

	18-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65+	Total
Family members	70%	70%	78%	84%	83%	85%	79%
Friends	59%	51%	47%	25%	21%	22%	37%
Work colleagues	8%	23%	14%	9%	6%	1%	10%
Neighbours	4%	12%	5%	4%	3%	2%	5%
Casual acquaintances	6%	8%	5%	6%	2%	3%	5%

### Debates and Undecided Voters

A crucial electoral sub-group for whom the debates did seem to matter were 'undecided' voters, individuals who were uncertain which party would deserve their support on Polling Day. Fewer undecided voters in our pre-campaign survey had intended to watch the first debate than among the sample as a whole (44% vs. 61%) and fewer actually watched it (49% vs. 65%). That means, however, that as many as a half of the undecided voters did watch the first debate, about a half of whom claimed to have seen all of it. Moreover, more than three tenths of those of our pre-campaign survey respondents who intended to watch the first debate said that they would do so to help them to make up their minds how eventually to vote. Over a quarter (28%) of our post-election respondents who went to the polls said that things they saw or heard during the election campaign had helped them to decide how to vote. Evidence pointing to the importance of the debates for this group emerged when we asked the post-election respondents to name up to three sources of campaign communication (from a list that included leader debates, television news, interviews of politicians, newspapers, radio news and talking with others over social media) that had been most helpful to them for gaining whatever they might have wanted to get out of following the campaign. The debates were mentioned more often than any other channel for having helped them 'to make up my mind how to vote' as the following rank order shows:

Debates	48%
Television news	42%
Interviews with journalists	33%
Newspapers	19%
Social media	11%

The debates were not only useful to these ‘vote-guidance seekers’. They were also deemed helpful in many other ways, depending on the campaign outcome concerned. Thus, debates also topped the rank order for comparing the leaders’ abilities to run the country well (56% endorsed debates, followed by TV news 47% and interviews with journalists 44%). Debates ranked second (45%) after TV news (51%), followed by interviews (42%) for learning about the parties’ policies; for judging coalition and deal-making prospects (46%) just below TV news (47%) followed by interviews (38%); and for understanding the country’s problems better (42%) after TV news (58%) followed again by political interviews (39%).

Although engaging via social media was not among the top three sources for satisfying any of the above-mentioned information needs, not surprisingly more 18-24 year-olds reported finding this useful than did members of the other age groups. Among first-time electors, debates were rated best for voting guidance (52%), followed by TV news (34%) and social media (31%). And for serving other campaign information needs, such as learning about party policies and the competing leaders’ abilities, a quarter of the youngest voters mentioned social media – ranking them fourth but still some way after the more mainstream sources.

**To sum up, the 2015 debates mattered for:**

- Their large and widely spread audience reach
- Especially reaching less politically-minded voters
- Their particular appeal to young voters
- Increasing interest in following the rest of the campaign
- Learning gains reported by viewers
- Helping some undecided electors to make up their minds how to vote
- High levels of appreciation among other viewers for conveying desired information about party policies and leaders’ abilities - and
- Being responsible for big improvements in evaluations of the debaters’ abilities to satisfy voters’ civic communication demands

## **2.2 Did the entitlements matter in their own right and, if so, how?**

We now turn to the core issues posed and faced by this study: What would voters, when regarding themselves as democratic citizens, want the debates to offer them? How would they evaluate party leaders’ performances in those terms? Would their assessments have a bearing on their decisions to view the debates, what they got out of them and their judgements about whether and how to vote? In answering these questions, we have placed great emphasis upon the five democratic entitlements that we have outlined in chapter 1. We were concerned to learn whether the conditions that people told us they needed from the TV debates to help them to perform the role of democratic citizens were met. More profoundly, perhaps, we wanted to investigate the underlying image of a citizen as someone who actually wants to be engaged by politicians in a tolerably reflective discourse. Is such an image realistic or not? Does it matter if the ‘democratic entitlements’ which we have endeavoured to elicit and measure are catered for or ignored?

We explored questions relating to debate viewers’ entitlements empirically by proceeding in two stages. In the first, we examined bi-variate relationships between sample members’ responses to the entitlement measures and their demographic backgrounds (age, gender, socio-economic status and educational attainment), degree of interest in politics, their pejorative and charitable

images of politicians, and intentions to view (and reported viewing of) the debates. Having found evidence in many of these cross-tabulations of clear associations of respondents' evaluations of how the party leaders might have and had satisfied their entitlements with many of their other orientations to the debates, we then modelled those relationships using multiple regression, in which the responses to the entitlements were statistically predicted whilst controlling against potential confounders (i.e. other influences such as demographic characteristics).

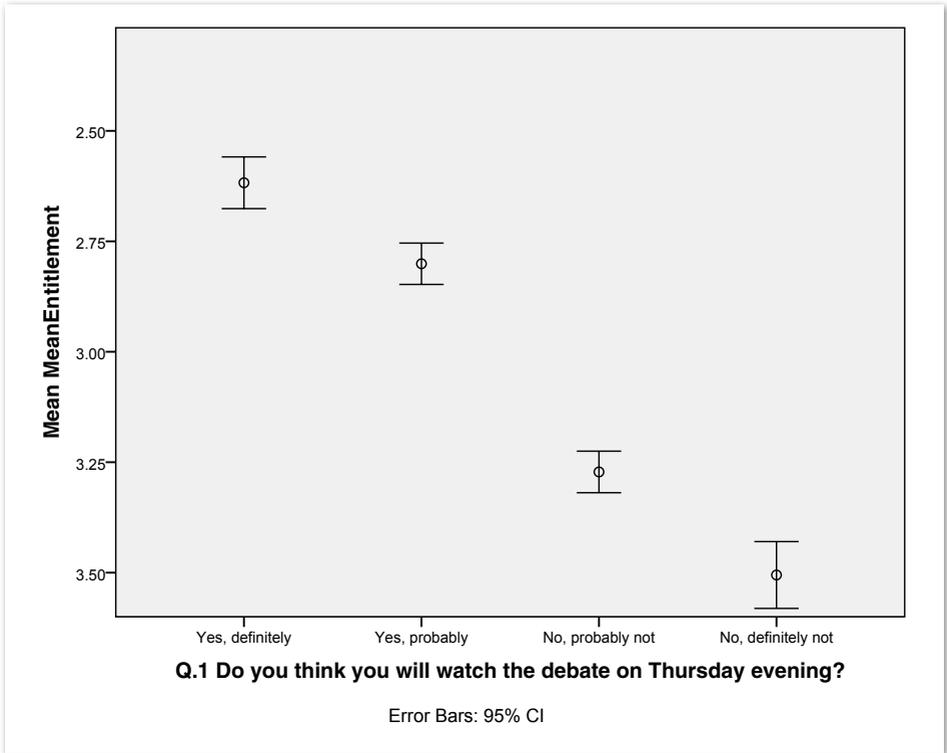
We might have expected, given the abundance and wide variety of messages unleashed by the debates, and the diversity of backgrounds and relations to politics of British voters, that a multiplicity of factors would have played on viewers' readings of the debates. In fact, just two variables were strongly and consistently associated with people's views of the debates. One was the level of people's interest in politics. The more interested they considered themselves to be in politics, the more likely they were to watch the debates and to feel confident that they were getting what they needed out of them. Strikingly, however, whether people felt that their entitlements were satisfied by what they saw and heard in the debates was invariably a highly significant determinant of their orientations to the debates, even when political interest was controlled, and in some cases was even more powerfully involved than political interest had been.

Before tracing these lines of influence, we ask who did and did not expect their entitlements to be delivered by the debaters at the outset of the campaign. Most confident, to a considerable and statistically significant extent, were already politically interested voters. They were followed by those who reported having the most charitable images of politicians and by younger voters. To illustrate, confident expectations of being engaged in the debate ranged from 48% of the very politically interested electors to 37% of the fairly interested, 14% of the not very interested and 4% of the not at all interested. Confidence that the debaters would make their points directly and understandably ranged from 54% of those who strongly agreed that politicians were 'sincere in their principles' through to 34% who tended to agree, 22% who tended to disagree and 11% of those strongly disagreeing. And 49% of the first-time voters (18-24 year-olds), compared with 70% of those aged 65 and older, lacked confidence in the debaters' likelihood of making their points directly and understandably.

The number of ways in which viewers' evaluations of the extent to which their entitlements had been met (or not) played a part – and often the most important part – in their overall responses to the debates were quite remarkable. Eight stand out as being particularly important.

First, as had been shown earlier, after witnessing the seven party leaders' performances in the first (ITV) debate, **many people felt more confident that their entitlements as democratic citizens were being met than they had expected to be left feeling before the debate.**

Secondly, **the more confident that people felt about the likelihood of the debates satisfying the needs expressed by the entitlement measures, the more likely their intention to watch the first debate** – as Figure 2.1 shows.<sup>2</sup>

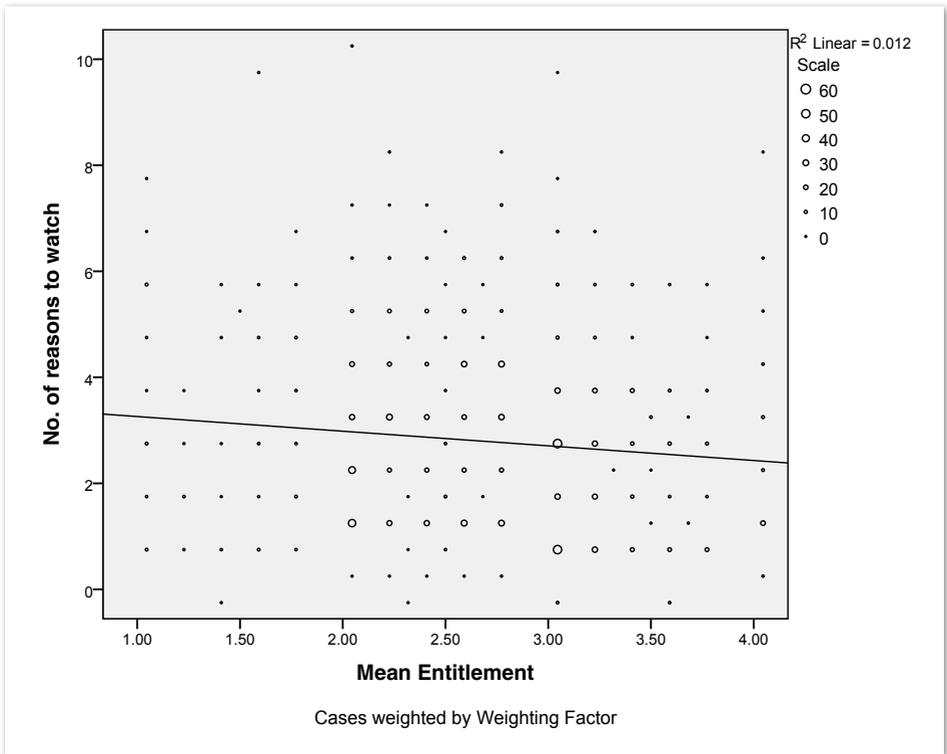


**FIGURE 2.1: Entitlements by intention to watch**

(Figure 2.1 is an error bar where each dot shows the mean score within the group and the bars give a measure of sampling error for this mean – formally, they show a 95% confidence interval for the true mean. Note here that the vertical scale is 1=very confident...4=not at all confident, i.e. lower scores correspond to higher levels of confidence.)

A regression analysis of the possible sources of first-debate viewing intentions (shown in the Appendix) confirmed that the entitlements and people’s levels of political interest were both powerful, independent influences on intentions to tune in to the first debate. Except for some minor age effects, demographic status was not involved. There was also a slight, albeit statistically significant, tendency for holders of pejorative images of politicians to be less likely to want to see the first debate. All this leads us to conclude that people were motivated to watch the debates when they had reason to believe that they would help them to pursue democratic citizenship on their own terms.

Thirdly, **the total number of reasons that intending viewers of the first debate gave for expecting to watch it depended to some extent on how confident they were that the party leaders would cater for their entitlements.** This trend is illustrated by the accompanying scattergraph – where higher levels of confidence (i.e. scores to the left) are associated with more reasons to watch.

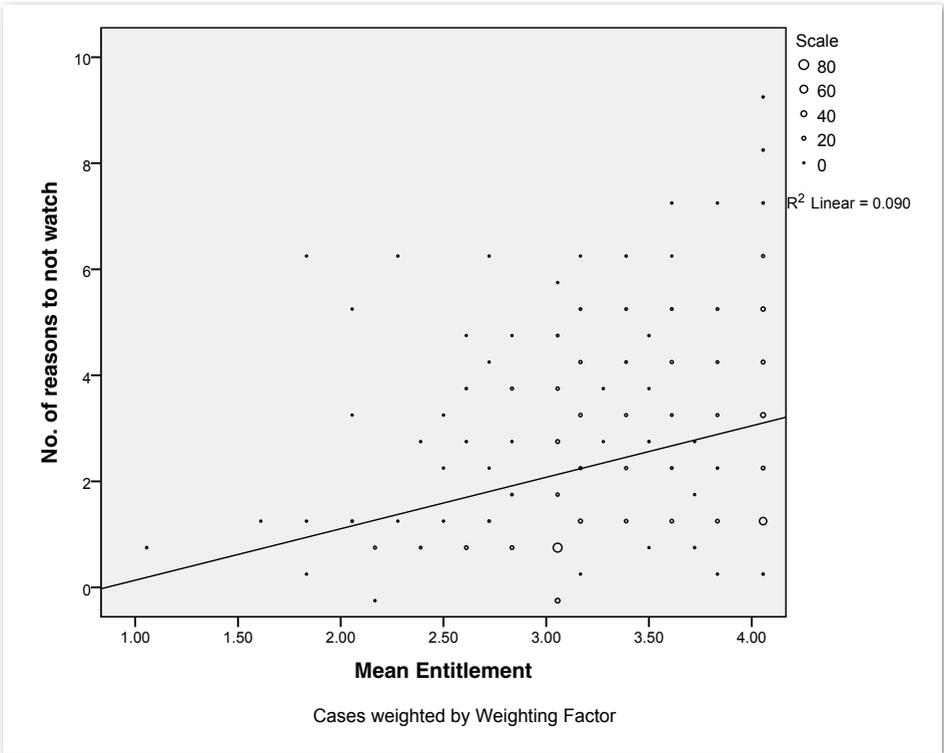


**FIGURE 2.2: Reasons to watch by Entitlements**

According to a multiple regression analysis (see Appendix), the most statistically significant predictors of the number of reasons to watch the first debate were (in order of importance):

- Political interest – more interest, more reasons to watch
- Entitlements – stronger agreement with entitlement statements, more reasons to watch
- Gender – more reasons to watch by women

Fourthly, **the reasons that would-be avoiders of the first debate gave for not intending to watch it were more numerous among those who lacked confidence in the party leaders' willingness or ability to meet the five entitlements.** The slope in the accompanying scattergraph illustrates this trend and indicates, being somewhat steeper than the one in Figure 2.2, that reasons for not watching the first debate were better explained by our entitlement measures than were reasons for intending to view it.

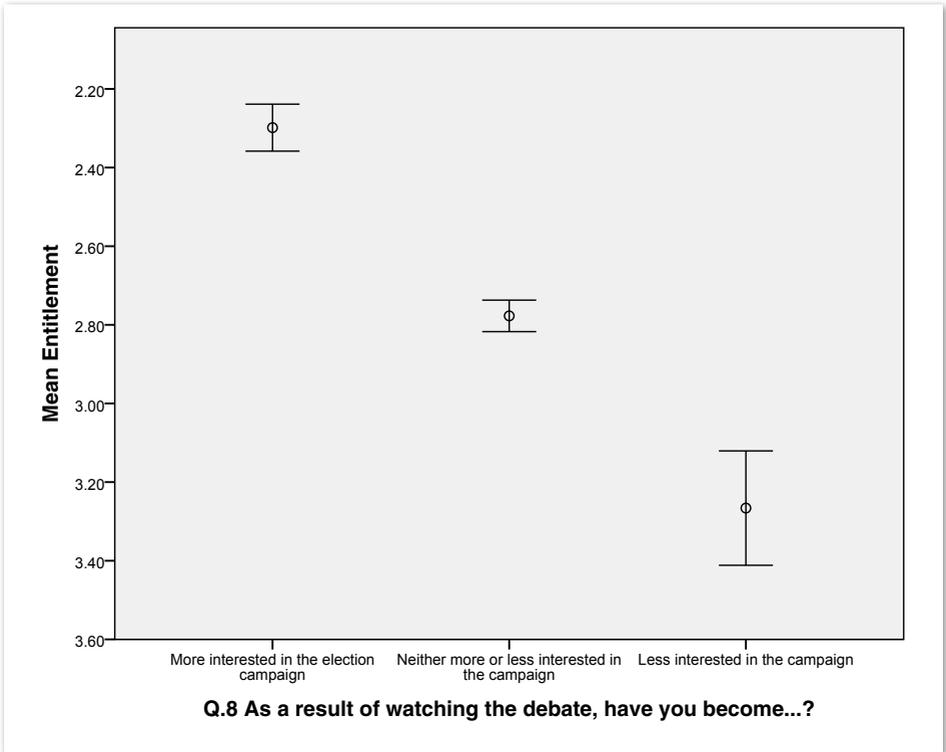


**FIGURE 2.3: Reasons to not watch by Entitlements**

Our regression analysis of these relationships (see Appendix) showed that in this case the biggest statistically significant predictors of the number of reasons given for not watching the first debate were in order of importance:

- Age – the older the individual, more reasons not to watch
- Entitlements – higher agreement with the entitlement statements, fewer reasons not to watch
- Political interest – less interest, more reasons not to watch
- Pejorative views of politicians – more endorsements of pejorative statements, more reasons not to watch

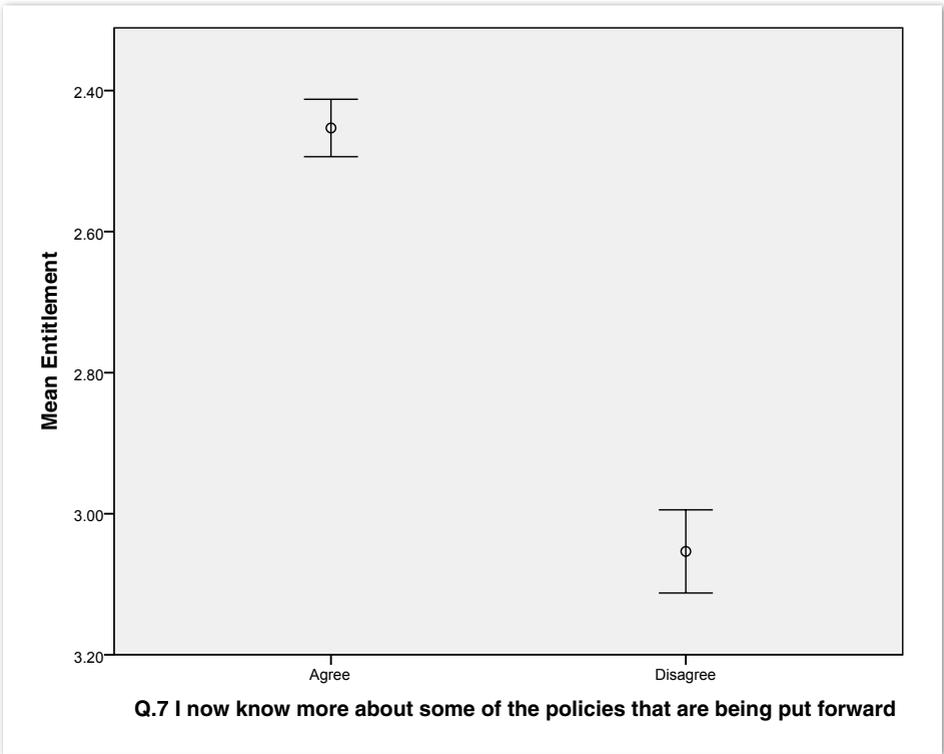
Fifthly, **the more that people felt that their entitlements had been satisfied in the first debate, the more likely they were to express an interest in following the rest of the campaign.** Thus the debate not only boosted people’s appreciation of a single media event but also stimulated a longer-term commitment to the electoral drama. Figure 2.4 graphically depicts a decided trend for campaign interest to increase when viewers were more satisfied with how the debaters had addressed them.



**FIGURE 2.4: Entitlements by interest in following the rest of the campaign**

Indeed, according to our multiple regression analysis (see the Appendix), the extent to which people felt that their entitlements had been realised was a greater driver of increased campaign interest than any other factor – which was followed by level of political interest and age (with campaign interest among the youngest viewers having been most dependent on their entitlement assessments – an effect that was lessened in successive age groups).

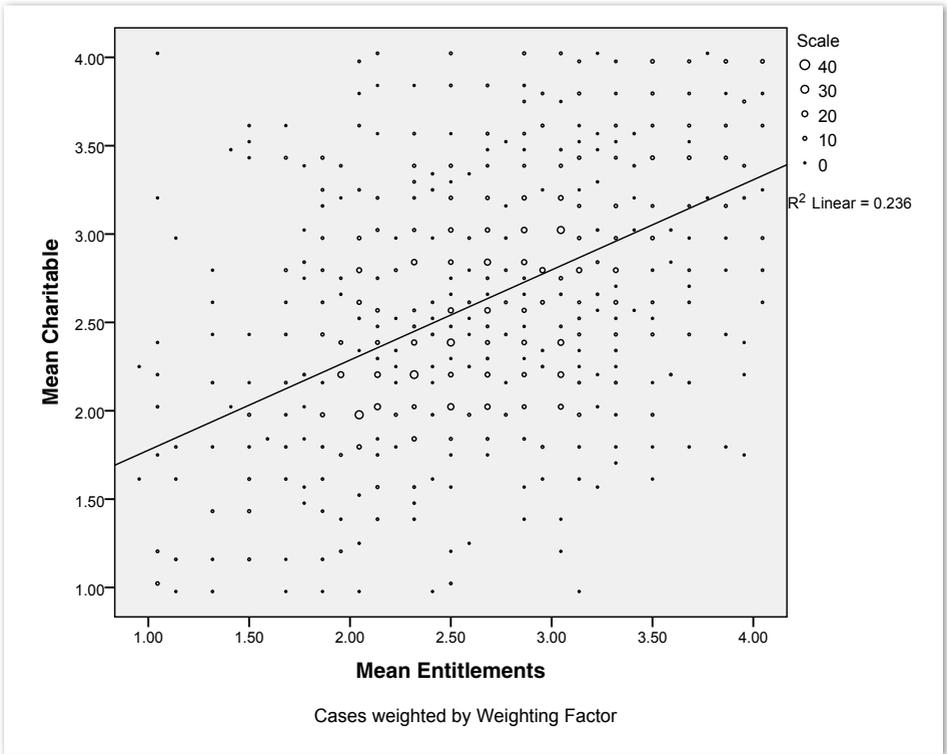
Sixthly, **having their entitlements met seems to have helped viewers to acquire some of the information about British politics which they had hoped the debates might provide.** This possibility was tested by examining sources of influence on the first debate viewers' agreement or disagreement with the following three statements: 'I now know more about some of the policies that are being put forward'; 'I now know more about what the party leaders are like'; and 'I have a clearer idea now of which parties might work together in a coalition or some other deal after the election'. The results were similar for all three propositions and strongest for learning more about party policies, as depicted in Figure 2.5.

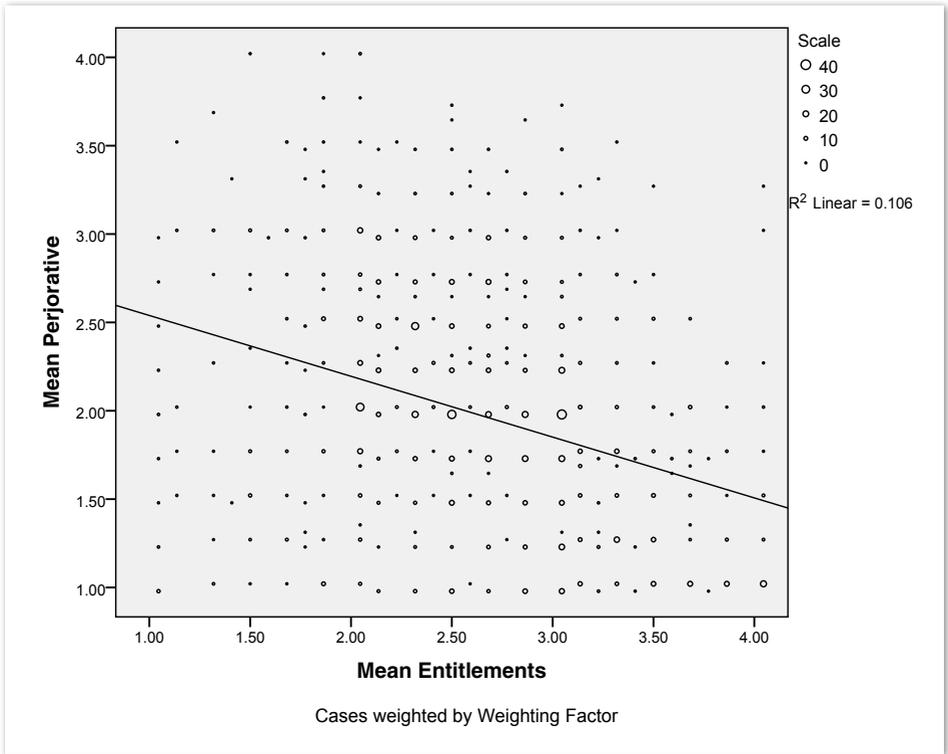


**FIGURE 2.5: Entitlements by ‘Knowing more about policies...’**

A multiple regression analysis (see Appendix) showed that in this case, entitlement delivery had far and away the greatest effect after all variables were controlled, followed by level of political interest and to some extent by gender (learning gain in response to entitlement realization having been somewhat greater among women than men).

The findings of our seventh and eighth analyses are best considered together. They deal with the question of whether there was a relationship between people feeling their democratic entitlements had been satisfied and their images of what politicians are like. The two analyses focused on impacts on pejorative and more charitable images separately. We found that **the more people felt that their entitlements had been realised, the more charitable were their images of politicians; while to a lesser (but statistically significant) extent, when people considered that their entitlements were not realised, they regarded politicians more pejoratively.** The trends are presented as scattergraphs in Figures 2.6 and 2.7.

**FIGURE 2.6: Charitable views by Entitlements**



**FIGURE 2.7: Pejorative views by Entitlements**

One regression analysis (see Appendix) confirmed that the summed entitlement measure had had the greatest effect on charitable image holding, followed by influences from certain age groups and those of higher socio-economic status (A/Bs). Interestingly, the degree of an individual’s professed political interest had no bearing at all here. Another regression analysis (see Appendix) confirmed that people’s perceptions that their entitlements had not been met during the debate was associated more closely with pejorative images of politicians than was any other factor. Among individuals of lower socio-economic status (D/Es), pejorative images of politicians were also somewhat strengthened by the debaters’ perceived communication failings. But the R squared coefficients for the two results - .23 for charitable images and only .11 for pejorative ones - show that the former were considerably more influenced by the debaters’ modes of discourse than were the latter.

**To sum up, perceptions of likely or actual entitlement delivery were more involved than any other factor in:**

- Promoting interest in the rest of the campaign
- Reported learning from the debates' contents
- Enhancing charitable images of politicians
- Reinforcing pejorative images of politicians (if debaters were thought not to have addressed them as reflective citizens)

**They were also highly involved, to the same extent as professed political interest, in:**

- Intentions to view the first debate

**And they were associated, among other factors, with:**

- The number of reasons viewers had for watching the first debate
- The number of reasons some people had for avoiding the first debate (due to lack of expected entitlement delivery)

### 2.3 How do British voters perceive politicians – pejoratively, charitably, stereotypically, or what?

A big gulf between leading politicians and ordinary members of the public is a commonly accepted fact of British political life. It is generally understood that many British voters are thoroughly disenchanted with their elected representatives. But this presumed root feature, voiced by journalists, commentators and even some politicians themselves almost as a matter of routine, has not actually been researched in any depth. We therefore aimed to establish in our study how extensively and in what strength these sentiments are held and by whom, how they are constituted, and whether they are counter-balanced to any degree by more favourable – more charitable – images of what British politicians are like.

Here is the order in which the members of our pre-campaign sample endorsed each of eight statements about politicians – four negatively and four positively worded:

**TABLE 2.11**

	Strongly Agree %	Tend to Agree %	Tend to Disagree %	Strongly Disagree %*
Politicians are frequently hypocritical	32	47	10	2
Politicians don't know what is happening in the real world	27	41	20	4
Politicians put their own interests ahead of their constituents' interests	24	43	18	4
Politicians never keep their promises	20	46	22	4
Politicians don't get enough credit for the good things they do	5	36	31	15
Politicians want what is best for the country	4	35	32	16
Politicians should not be judged by higher standards than ordinary people	10	28	29	20
Politicians are sincere about their principles	3	21	39	24

\*Rows do not add up to 100% because 'don't know' responses to the items ranged from 8 to 13%.

Three main points stand out from these data. First of course, on balance British voters are more negatively than positively disposed to their politicians. Secondly, those pejorative attitudes are counter-balanced to some extent by more charitable views - two fifths of the respondents agreed with the more positive statements they had been asked to consider. Thirdly, and most importantly, opinions differed: there is no single standard outlook on these matters. Only minorities - between a fifth to no more than a third of the electorate - 'strongly' agreed that politicians are typically hypocritical, out of touch, out for themselves, and unreliable. Yet those are the very voices which reporters cite and portray so often as representative of the British public at large.

These views were held more widely in certain sectors of the public than in others, but charitable images of politicians were distributed more evenly across the electorate than were pejorative ones. Counter-intuitively, level of political interest, which had discriminated people's orientations to the debates in so many ways, did not seem to have affected their images of what British politicians are like. Put differently, the least politically interested voters were no more inclined than the most interested ones to regard politicians unfavourably (though more of the former did lack an opinion about them).

A rather complex role of age on these points is illustrated by the selected examples in Table 2.12

**TABLE 2.12**

	18-24 yr olds %	65+ %
<b>Put own interests first</b>		
Strongly agree	16	24
Tend to agree	37	44
Tend to disagree	20	19
Strongly disagree	5	5
Don't know	23	9
<b>Not in real world</b>		
Strongly agree	15	27
Tend to agree	38	43
Tend to disagree	25	19
Strongly disagree	4	7
Don't know	18	3
<b>Want what's best for the country</b>		
Strongly agree	3	3
Tend to agree	28	47
Tend to disagree	34	28
Strongly disagree	12	14
Don't know	22	8
<b>Don't get enough credit for the good they do</b>		
Strongly agree	3	7
Tend to agree	34	44
Tend to disagree	33	32
Strongly disagree	10	10
Don't know	20	

Whereas between a sixth and a quarter of first-time voters had no opinion on these matters, almost all the older voters knew where they stood on them. Older voters were more critical of politicians in these terms (in line with their 'jaded' responses to other questions we had put to them). But more of them were also prepared to give politicians charitable benefits of doubt! Otherwise, there was some tendency for individuals of higher socio-economic status to feel more charitably toward politicians, especially in terms of wanting what is best for the country. What people thought about politicians did differ considerably, however, according to their party affiliations. Across all the charitable items, without exception, there was an order of favourability running downward from Conservative supporters to Liberal Democrats, Labour and UKIP supporters. On wanting what's best for the country, for example, endorsements of agreement from these groups were 64%, 52%, 37% and 30%, respectively. Pejorative images of politicians also varied according to party affiliation but to a somewhat lesser extent. They were most prevalent among those intending to vote UKIP, followed by Labour, Liberal Democrat and Conservative supporters in that order. On not being in the real world, for example, endorsements of agreement among these groups were 82%, 73%, 63% and 56%, respectively.

Interestingly, in terms of their effects on how people regarded the debates and the debaters, pejorative and charitable images of politicians were not exact mirror images of each other. For one thing, to a marked degree, the electors who regarded politicians more charitably were also more confident that their democratic entitlements would be delivered by the leaders in the first debate. As typical examples, among those persons who thought that politicians want the best for the country, 66% were very confident, 64% fairly confident, 45% not very confident and 24% not at all confident that the debaters would back up their claims with factual evidence. Among those who considered that politicians don't get enough credit for the good they do, 62% were very confident, 54% fairly confident, 46% not very confident and 28% not at all confident that the debaters would express themselves directly and clearly. These are signs of quite powerful effects. Yet according to our data, no such influence stemmed from adherence to pejorative images of politicians.

In addition, as the results of the regression analyses reported in the previous section of this chapter have shown, whereas more charitably disposed voters gave more reasons for intending to watch the first debate, more pejoratively disposed ones gave more reasons for not intending to do so. Agreement with the statement that 'You can't trust what politicians say on TV' was clearly most affected of all. For example, 57% of those agreeing with the pejorative proposition that politicians never keep their promises, compared with only 20% of those not agreeing, gave lack of trust in politicians' utterances as a reason for giving the first debate a miss.

In fact, lack of trust emerged from this study as the biggest negative bug-bear in British voters' minds so far as political communication generally and TV election debates specifically are concerned. It was associated with low confidence in the delivery of each of the five entitlements to a greater extent than was any other measured factor. And it was more strongly related to pejorative images of what politicians are like than was any other factor.

Finally, Table 2.13 illustrates an extraordinary finding of the study.

**TABLE 2.13**

*Percentages of respondents agreeing that politicians:*

	Pre-campaign	Post-election
Never keep their promises	66%	67%
Are not given enough credit	42%	45%
Put their own interests first	67%	67%
Are not in the real world	68%	70%
Want the best for the country	40%	42%
Should not be judged by higher standards than ordinary people	38%	43%
Are frequently hypocritical	79%	80%
Are sincere in their principles	24%	25%

British electors' images of politicians after the campaign were virtually identical with those which they had held before the campaign began. A relatively favourable impression of the debates and the participating leaders seems to have been a rather bounded effect of exposure to them without any noticeable impact on what seem to be more firmly fixed ideas about politicians as such.

If, then, in aggregate the 2015 campaign experience did *not* alter voters' images of politicians, how might that be explained? Three possibly inter-related interpretations have occurred to us, though more research into this important finding is needed. First, whereas election debates, however useful, comprise a small number of specific time-bound events, people's more general impressions of their representatives could have been built up from an accumulation of perceptions of how politicians have, individually and collectively, behaved in and out of power over a long stretch of time. Secondly, a degree of media influence cannot be dismissed out of hand. Repeated exposure to negative political news and to sharp representations of themselves as anti-political and angry with the political establishment may have strengthened voters' pejorative impressions of politicians. After all, our post-election respondents did claim to have been just about as dependent on television news as on the debates to obtain what they wanted to get out of the 2015 campaign. And thirdly, an established conceptual distinction in academic social psychology may apply here. Whereas people's *opinions* on various matters that have come to their attention (like the debates) can be malleable, *attitudes* toward more abiding objects, ideas and persons (like politicians) *can* be more deeply rooted in individuals' psyches.

1. An exploratory factor analysis indicated that the five entitlement items measure a single uni-dimensional construct. It was therefore decided to take the mean value across the five items to produce an overall entitlements measure.

2. In all that follows, the entitlement score is produced by taking the mean score across the five entitlement items. Other mean scores (e.g. for charitable and pejorative views) are produced in similar ways.





## Chapter 3 - Social Media and the Debates

### Nick Anstead<sup>1</sup>

Prior to the 2010 election – as has been the case with all UK elections since 1997 – there was much talk of this being the first ‘internet election’. Afterwards however, commentators were more interested in the television debates. For example, Tory blogger turned talk radio host Iain Dale argued ‘This was supposed to be the election when internet politics came of age... it most certainly has been the TV election’ (2010). Clearly, the TV debates were central to the 2010 election campaign. However, the broadcasts did not take place in a vacuum. The ‘TV election’ reading of events neglects the fact that many citizens were not just passively watching the debates, but were also simultaneously researching, commenting and chatting online (for academic research on this, see: Ampofo, Anstead, & O’Loughlin, 2011; Chadwick, 2011; Elmer, 2013; Smith & Boyles, 2012). Therefore, one of the lessons from 2010 is that we cannot consider different types of media in isolation, but need to think more about how they overlap and interact with each other.

This was not necessarily a lesson that was heeded in the run up to the 2015 election, when there was much discussion of the contest being the first social media election (Prigg, 2015; Wendling, 2015). This argument did reflect some very significant developments in patterns of media consumption in the preceding years. Research conducted by Ofcom in 2014 found that 72 per cent of UK adults had a social media profile. Of this group, 81 per cent of them accessed social media on a daily basis (Ofcom, 2015: 32, 113). A poll conducted for this project found that 21 per cent of voters said that social media were an important news source for them. This figure rose to 56 per cent for 18-24 year olds, making it the most important media source for this group ahead of television (39 per cent), newspapers (16 per cent) and more traditional webpages (54 per cent) (Comres, 2015: Q7).<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, separate research conducted by the pollster Ipsos-Mori found that 34 per cent of citizens aged between 18–24 thought that social media would influence their voting decision (Ipsos-Mori, 2015b).

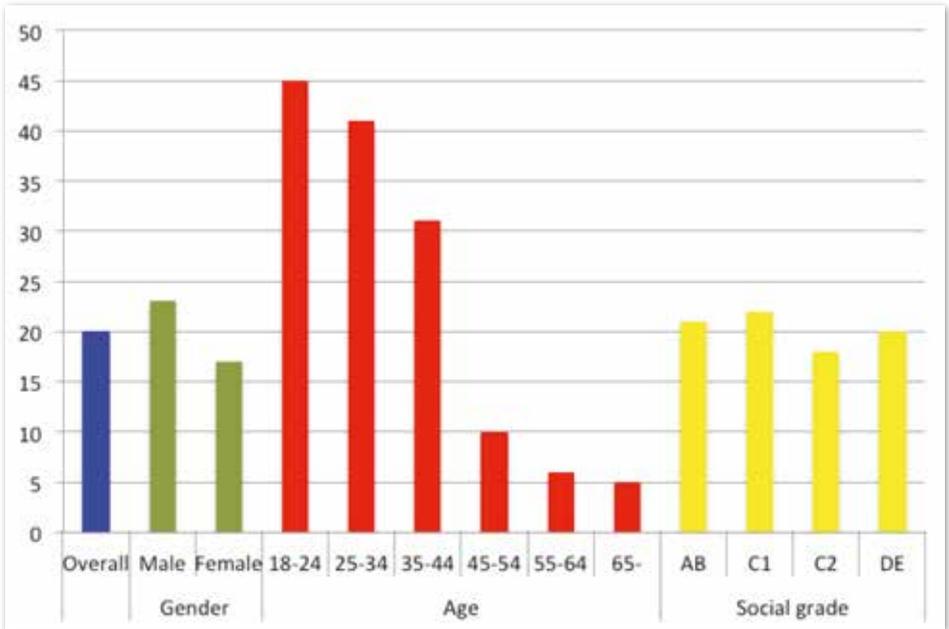
Considering the 2015 election retrospectively, it is increasingly clear that we cannot think about the TV debates without acknowledging these developments. As is detailed in this chapter, a significant minority of citizens watched the debates while also using a second screen (a smartphone, a tablet or a laptop) to create and consume social media content. Furthermore, the traces left by these activities bled into mainstream coverage of the debates, often being cited by journalists as evidence of public reaction. This type of coverage, it will be argued below, has huge potential to connect the public with what have traditionally been relatively closed, elite-run broadcast events such as TV debates, but also pose quite specific challenges in terms of the types of inferences and conclusions that can be meaningfully drawn from the data.

### 3.1 Who was using social media during the TV debates?

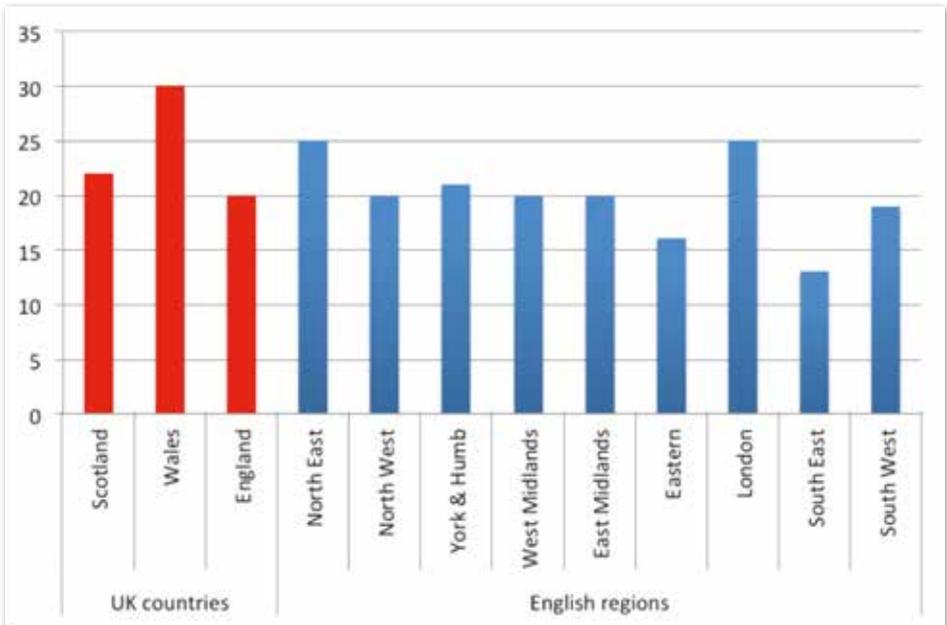
Using the survey conducted for this project, we can start to understand exactly which types of citizens were using social media to comment on the debates in real time. Our data show that, overall, 20 per cent of those interviewed claimed that they had used social media while watching the debates, either to comment or to access additional information.

However, it is important to note that the distribution of this social media consumption and production was not equal across the electorate. This is – predictably – most apparent with age. As noted in

chapter 2, nearly half of all 18-24 year olds (45 per cent) answered in the affirmative when asked if they used social media during the debates. This figure decreases as those questioned get older: only 5 per cent of over 65s used social media in this way. Class demonstrates a more complex relationship, with C1s (lower middle class) being the most likely to have used social media and C2s (upper working class) the least likely.



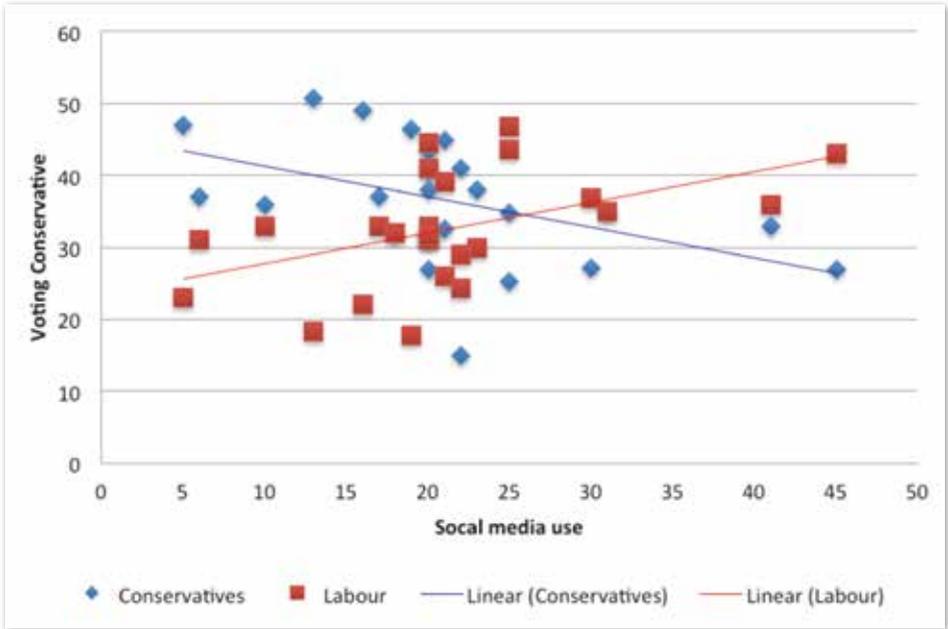
**Figure 3.1: Percentage of citizens divided by personal characteristics answering yes to the question: 'During the debate did you go online to talk or get others views about the debate?' (Comres 2015: Q3).**



**Figure 3.2: Percentage of citizens divided by region answering yes to the question: ‘During the debate did you go online to talk or get others views about the debate?’ (Comres 2015: Q3).**

This dataset also allows us to look at regional differences in the UK. These data must be treated with some caution, as when the sample is broken down some of the sub-samples become very small (in Wales for example, only 17 people of the 56 surveyed said they had used social media during the debate). Nonetheless, these data point to some interesting differences across the UK. Given the apparent success of the SNP online and the so-called ‘CyberNats’ that became prominent during the referendum campaign, it is unsurprising that Scottish debate viewers used social media marginally more than the UK-average. At the other end of the spectrum, the South East of England, which is also one of the highest Conservative voting areas in the country, had a lowest rate of social media engagement during the debates (16 per cent). London and the North-East of England, two areas that strongly supported Labour, had a very high volume of social media use (both 25 per cent).

These differences in the rate of debate-driven online engagement across the population raise the question of whether social media have created an unrepresentative online discussion forum. This claim was made in the immediate aftermath of the election by a number of commentators, especially with regard to the political left (Cellan-Jones, 2015; Moore, 2015). This argument was based on the seeming success of the Labour Party and Labour supporters in organising Twitter campaigns and spreading viral content (such as the ‘Milifandom’ phenomenon), and how this contrasted with their failure in the election itself (BBC News Online, 2015a). Noise generated online clearly did not translate into votes in the ballot box.



**Figure 3.3: Proportion of various social and regional groups using social media watching debates plotted against Labour and Conservative vote share (Comres, 2015: Q3. Electoral data from: Hawkins, Keen et al 2015; Ipsos-Mori, 2015).**

Our survey data allow for a simple indication of the extent of this pattern. Figure 3.3 plots the various demographic and regional data-points we gathered (specifically: age, gender, socio-economic status, and region of residence) against the percentage vote share achieved by the Labour and Conservative parties among these same groups. To be clear, this graphic cannot allow for any claims of statistical significance or causation, but it does give an indication as to an interesting general pattern: groups with a greater propensity to vote Labour seem to be more likely to have used social media while watching the debates. In contrast, groups with a lower propensity to use social media during the debate have a stronger tendency to support the Conservative Party.

Even setting aside the relative propensity of left-leaning and right-leaning voters to post online during the election, there is also the question of whether social media promote segregated political conversations. Research by the think tank Demos and the University of Sussex during the campaign found that Twitter content rarely broke out of partisan cohorts online – that is, even if it was ‘trending’, pro-Labour content tended to circulate among Labour supporters, while pro-Conservative content tended to circulate among Conservative supporters (Bray, 2015). It is not inconceivable that very high profile moments in the campaign, like the debates, might promote a more unified focus across the political spectrum, but the structural elements of social media (i.e. who individuals tend to follow and be followed by, as well as the types of content that the algorithms curating social media show them in their news feeds) will remain in place. This raises the question of exactly what, if anything, social media can tell us about public opinion and, as an extension of this, how they were used by the mainstream media during their coverage of the TV debates?

### 3.2 Social media as a tool for understanding public reaction in the media

The seven-way leaders debate on ITV on the 2<sup>nd</sup> April (the one ‘true’ election debate broadcast, in the sense that it featured all the major political actors on the same stage at the same time) saw 1.5 million debate-related tweets being published. This compares with an overall viewing audience of 7.3 million people. These figures though disguise the fact that individual social media users might tweet on multiple occasions during the course of a debate. In actuality then, the 1.5 million debate related tweets were produced by just 278,000 unique users – that is, just 3.8 per cent of the programme’s viewers (Twitter.com, 2015). While not an insubstantial figure, these numbers should make us wary of trying to make statements about audience opinion based on Twitter data, not least because other academic research has suggested that even within the minority of viewers commenting online, the production of content is very unevenly distributed, with a small number of individuals accounting for a huge proportion of the social media posts appearing (Anstead & O’Loughlin, 2011; Hindman, 2008).

Coverage drawing on social media to talk about public reaction highlighted a few important points about social media and election debates. First, and as earlier research on the 2010 election noted (Anstead & O’Loughlin, 2015), social media data were used in three distinct ways to illustrate public reaction to the debates. The first of these was the simple citation of individual tweets as illustrative of a particular strand of public opinion, a sort of ‘electronic vox pop’. Often the posts cited were humorous or mocking in tone (for example, see BBC Online, 2015). A second approach to employing social media was simply to quote the quantity of posts appearing on specific topics, containing particular hashtags, or even what political content was ‘trending’ online. The BBC, for example, noted that the #BattleForNumber10 hashtag ‘shot to the top of Twitter’s list of UK and worldwide trends just as Thursday’s duelling interview session began’ (BBC News Online, 2015b). One technology firm even produced a smart phone application that allowed users to monitor exactly what political content was trending online at any given moment (Tata Consultancy, 2015), while political parties tried to galvanise supporters to share content from the debates as a form of activism. The Labour Party, for example, tried to make the hashtag #HellYesEd trend on Twitter, referencing a Miliband sound bite from the first set of TV interviews.

The most sophisticated attempts to link social media data and public opinion during the debates involved what has been termed ‘semantic polling’ (Anstead & O’Loughlin, 2015). This essentially involves machine reading large bodies of social media data and trying to convert it into a numeric sentiment value. Drawing on work produced by Demos and the University of Sussex, various news outlets quoted data and produced graphics examining the Twitter reaction to the first TV debate on 2<sup>nd</sup> April. The language used in these stories was carefully caveated to limit the claims being made. Channel 4’s story on the data was clear that the numbers only related to ‘who won Twitter’ (Channel 4 News, 2015), while the Daily Telegraph concluded its article on the subject by noting that ‘People who use Twitter aren’t representative of the public of course, and the algorithms sometimes get it wrong, but overall this is a new window into British politics in the digital age’ (Miller, 2015). Welcome though they were, these caveats were overshadowed by the quantitative authority lent to the stories by the statistics included and the accompanying graphics. The presentation of the data gave a clear message: social media analysis is scientific. It was much rarer to find serious attempts to reflect on the strengths and weaknesses of the method being employed (Flemming, 2015 is one exception to this pattern).

Second, when mainstream media cited social media as reflective of public opinion, this almost inevitably meant Twitter data were being used. Twitter is not the pre-eminent social network in the UK (it has 11.9 million users, as opposed to Facebook’s 35.1 million) (Ofcom, 2015). However,

the data it produces are widely accessible and have created a cottage industry of consultancies, think tanks and academic research units producing analysis. It is also a popular tool with journalists. Another virtue of this type of research (at least from the perspective of the organisation doing the commissioning) is that data and analysis are relatively cheap, especially in comparison with organising traditional representative sample polls. This attribute is especially significant given the proliferation of debate formats in the 2015 election. In a regional context, for example, broadcasters may have lacked the resources to commission traditional post-debate polls. Social media analysis was sometimes used to fill this vacuum in post-debate coverage (for example see ITV News, 2015 for coverage of the Welsh election debate employing Twitter analysis). On occasions, online sources other than Twitter were used in inventive ways to make statements about public reaction. Google search trends, for example, were widely commented on after the 2<sup>nd</sup> April debate, with popular searches reflecting the public's attempts to grapple with the complexities of the election ('Can I vote SNP' and 'What is austerity?') and also an interest in the superficial ('how tall is Nigel Farage?') (Sparrow, 2015).

Google searches taking place during the debates offered at least two interesting insights. The first of these is an important reminder of just how confused some members of the public are about the political process, and the effort required on the part of both politicians and journalists to make it comprehensible to them. This is perhaps most evident in the fourth most asked question during the ITV debates, 'What is a referendum?' This can be interpreted in two ways. We might view it with concern. After all, can citizens with such limited knowledge really make informed decisions when they exercise their right to vote? The alternative reading is more optimistic though. Despite their limited knowledge, not only have these citizens watched an hour and a half long political debate programme, but they have also undertaken additional research using Google with the aim of becoming better informed.

Second, it was notable that the statements being made in the TV debates seemed to influence the searches being undertaken. Following the BBC debate, held on the 16<sup>th</sup> April, 'What is austerity' leapt from the ninth most searched for question during the seven way debate to the most searched for question (Gosden, 2015). This is not surprising though, as the BBC debate did not feature either David Cameron or Nick Clegg, so the anti-austerity / anti-coalition discourse of the opposition parties dominated.

### **3.3 Can social media data ever help with understanding the public?**

In the context of public opinion, the 2015 election will doubtless be remembered for the failure of pollsters to predict the momentum that would carry the Conservative Party to its first outright majority since 1992. This is something of a shame, as it neglects the many innovations that the election also saw in this area, ranging from the publication of large sample polls involving 25,000 interviews, a massive increase in the number of constituency-level polls, and greater public access to qualitative data from focus groups conducted in important marginal seats. In the context of events like the TV debates, social media provide a rich resource of data relating to public reaction. The broader question, which it is increasingly important for journalists, politicians and academics to address, is what kind of meaningful statements can actually be made based on these data as these analysis techniques evolve. It is certainly questionable how appropriate statements about 'winning debates on Twitter' are, for example.

For journalists seeking to use data of this kind to report on TV debates, there are multiple challenges. Even with traditional opinion polls, it is unclear what ‘winning a debate’ actually means. Academic research has suggested that the public’s reaction to debates is conditioned by their expectations of the performance of each of the participants. More broadly, journalists need to reconcile the position of debates as the central moment in the mediated campaign with the empirical evidence that TV debates rarely have much of an impact on the outcome of an election (Birdsell, 2014).

The unrepresentativeness of social media analysis amplifies this challenge further. It may be the case that future research methods are able to use social media data to model representative samples (Miller et al., 2015). Alternatively, it could be that social media analysis is better thought of as being a qualitative research method, allowing for insights into conversations and motivations, rather like a giant online focus group (Anstead & O’Loughlin, 2015).

One thing is very clear. The sheer quantity and accessibility of data being produced on social media, especially during high profile events such as the TV debates, will ensure the data are analysed. The greater challenge is to ask how the data can be used and explained in responsible and meaningful ways.

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2. Survey participants were asked to name up to three sources of media that were important to them; hence the percentages total more than 100.



## Chapter 4 - Democratic Demand – Satisfied or Unmet?

We began this report by setting out two key questions that have framed our research: What did voters want and expect from TV election debates in 2015? How did voters evaluate the debates in terms of their needs as democratic citizens? In answering these questions, we set out to understand the debates as more than a marketing exercise to be evaluated by poll data showing how many people ‘bought’ the messages on offer. Instead, we wanted to see TV election debates as a toolbox containing a range of civic resources that can help voters to function more effectively as democratic citizens. In short, our research focuses on the terms of democratic demand - where this was met and where it was frustrated.

The findings we have presented show that the 2015 TV election debates performed a crucially important civic role, reaching sections of the population least likely to be touched by the rest of the campaign; helping citizens to acquire the information they need to make meaningful choices; and thereby boosting the electorate’s confidence. Whatever their strategic effects might have been in terms of inter-party competition, the debates served democratic citizenship in several ways.

### 4.1 How did the debates contribute to democratic citizenship?

Some critics were ready to write off the 2015 election debates before they ever got going. In some cases, this was because they agreed with David Cameron that the 2010 debates had ‘sucked the life’ out of the previous general election campaign. Others, such as Fraser Nelson, editor of *The Spectator*, expressed concern that ‘TV debates seek to impose a US-style presidential dynamic on a UK constituency system’ (6 March, 2015). When the original debate proposals from the broadcasters were rejected, some commentators regarded this as a welcome return to campaigning as normal. When the broadcasters came up with a new proposal for a diversity of ‘debate’ forms, including an expanded centrepiece debate featuring seven party leaders, critics declared that this would surely lead to an unedifying mess, with debaters constantly talking over one another and potential voters left confused. Dan Hodges in *The Telegraph* predicted that the seven-leader debate on ITV would be ‘organised chaos’ (1 April, 2015). Matthew D’Ancona, writing in the *Evening Standard* on the same day advised his readers to have their ‘earplugs at the ready for tomorrow night — we may have to settle for the least chaotic chaos’.

But the reality turned out to be rather different. As we have demonstrated in the preceding pages, the debates were not only well received by a larger TV audience than was attracted to any other election coverage, but seem to have encouraged viewers to take a more active interest in the rest of the campaign. When asked after polling day which sources of information were the most helpful to them as voters in understanding the policies of the various parties, respondents considered the TV debates (at 45%) to have been more useful than newspapers (30%), social media (10%), radio (11%), party leaflets (15%) and interviews with politicians (42%) – and only slightly less useful than television news (51%). From a democratic demand perspective, it seems clear that the debates offered potential voters an opportunity to make sense of what was on offer that was qualitatively different from other moments in the campaign.

But this opportunity was not grasped by everyone in the same way. Our research points to a complex public orientation to the democratic opportunities on offer during the 2015 election campaign, characterised by a mixture of initial doubts about whether their civic communication needs would be satisfied (which were allayed to some extent by exposure to the debates); real

reasons for seeking and claiming to have obtained modest enlightenment about what could matter to and affect them in the political world; some dislikes about how politicians ply their communication trade; nuanced negative and positive images of politicians; a widely held belief that one can see through and not be unduly influenced by politicians manipulative efforts (while suspecting that the defences of many of one's fellow citizens are not so sturdy). Amidst all that, how their civic demands were considered to have been met or not met made measurable and considerable differences to people's reception and utilization of the debates. Beyond these general observations, our findings show very clearly that the public was far from monolithic in the ways that it watched and evaluated the debates.

For example, the striking generational contrasts of attitudes towards and involvement in the debates tell an important story about how political expectations vary. Although older voters troop to the polls in greater numbers than younger ones, and more of them watched the debates, on average they were less impressed with the debaters' rhetoric for clarity, reliability and evidential back-up, and their images of politicians were more pejorative, albeit laced with somewhat more charitable views as well. For their part, although fewer young people go to the polls and fewer of them watched the debates, those who did see them were more favourably impressed with the political leaders' delivery of the entitlements we asked them to assess, and fewer of them held pejorative images of politicians as such. Given this contrast, initiatives designed to build upon the confident energy of younger citizens might well stand a chance of increasing their participation in politics.

Or consider the role of prior political interest in the study's findings. On the one hand, it was a powerful determinant (usually alongside entitlement delivery) of most of the orientations to the debates that we measured. But, on the other hand, it was not related at all to people's positive or negative images of politicians. Voters who described themselves as being 'very politically interested' felt just as negatively toward politicians, for example, as those who claimed to have no interest in politics at all. At a conceptual level, this suggests that the term 'political interest' may well mean many different things to different people and is in need of being unpacked. In terms of our immediate findings, it suggests that enthusiasm for politics and support for politicians should not be confused as the same thing.

And then, consider the matter of campaign communication sources. As Nick Anstead points out in his chapter, 'we cannot consider different types of media in isolation, but need to think about how they overlap and interact with each other'. Thus, although through its debates, news bulletins and political interviews, television dominated the 2015 campaign communication, much interpersonal communication was sparked by the debates: three fifths of the viewers of the first (ITV) debate having talked with others about it afterwards, and a fifth having done so during it (e.g. through second screens and the Internet). And although young people designated social media as a more important medium than other respondents for finding out about the election, social media were no higher than fourth in importance when rated by them for helpfulness with a range of campaign information needs. It was as if younger people did not rely on mainstream channels on an everyday news-following basis, but turned in great numbers to them when a high-profile 'media event' like an election debate came along. This suggests that the balance between mainstream and digital communication sources may vary depending on the relative salience of the event in question.

The differentiated responses to the 2015 debates confirm our view that it is a mistake to think of a homogeneous electorate/audience, encountering the debates with a single appetite. Just as consumers go to the market with varied dispositions, capacities, memories, needs and values, so do citizens faced with the task of making intelligent political judgements. A central feature of our research has been an attempt to understand democratic demand as being multi-dimensional.

#### **4.2 Voters as reflective citizens – why demand should be taken seriously**

How should the notion of democratic demand be understood? We begin by making the mundane, but often ignored observation that the work of being an attentive, reflective and efficacious voter is far from easy. There are numerous messages to be absorbed, facts to check up, records to analyse and competing values to be balanced. Most voters lead busy lives. Working through the claims, promises, professed evidence and rhetorical expositions is almost a full-time task. Democracy, if it is to be inclusive, requires heuristic cues. But voters are not one mass, as facile journalism sometimes depicts them. Different people face different challenges. That is why our theory of democratic entitlements has been so important for this study. It has allowed us to ask whether particular voter capacities, as well as their sum, were boosted or left untouched by debate-viewing. Our evidence is clear: watching the debates made a difference to the ways in which people felt confident about being able to perform as democratic voters. In the terms of our introduction to this report, the debates not only provided suppliers (the parties) with an opportunity to set out their stalls before the electorate, but opened up a space in which citizens could evaluate their would-be representatives on the basis of their own demand criteria – which we refer to in this report as entitlements.

Reflecting on the five entitlements derived from our qualitative research in the light of the findings from our survey research is illuminating. The first concern expressed by citizens related to how politicians addressed them. To put it bluntly, they were suspicious of manipulative rhetoric. After watching the seven-leader ITV debate, this suspicion lessened. Curiously, approximately three out of four respondents agreed with each of the following statements: *I am able to see through and avoid being influenced by what politicians say* (78%) and *I am concerned that a lot of people may have been taken in by the politicians' attempts to influence them* (76%). Here we have a classical illustration of what communication researchers have referred to as 'the third person effect', according to which a person exposed to a persuasive communication in the mass media sees this as having a greater effect on others than on him or herself. In short, people often fear or act upon effects that they do not think apply to them, but to everyone else. In this context, more pervasive exposure to engaging political debate, beyond the peculiar atmosphere of an election campaign, could help people to feel that they have more in common with other citizens because they are all sharing the same exposure to a political event.

Again, we think that our second entitlement – part of which referred to a capacity to check and challenge the credibility of claims made by the debating politicians – was highly relevant to the 2015 debates. According to Owen Jones, writing in *The Guardian*, the most searched – for question on Google during the debates was 'What is austerity'? Debate-watchers were confronted with a mass of detailed information – and misinformation – during the TV debates. From the deficit and quantitative easing to the volume of UK exports to the EU, they had to work their way through an array of claims and counter-claims. Evaluating the debates in terms of the extent to which they generated illuminating information or baffling jargon proved to be a useful strategy.

The third entitlement that citizens expressed to us was a sense of feeling engaged by the debates and the fourth entitlement concerned feeling understood by the leaders competing to represent them. The debates made less difference to the low expectations that people had regarding these entitlements, suggesting perhaps that we are looking here at more embedded and enduring communicative relationships that are unlikely to be overcome by one media encounter with leading politicians. After watching the debates, it was still the case that over half of our respondents felt both disengaged and unrecognised. This was confirmed by our finding that, despite the civic spur offered by the debates, people remained as negative in their images of politicians after the election campaign as they had been before it. We have offered some speculative thoughts about that in the previous chapter, but would note here that these two entitlements, which relate to fundamental sensitivities within the citizen-politician relationship, would seem to be at the core of the ongoing 'crisis of political disengagement' about which so many commentators have lamented.

The fifth and final entitlement that we explored in this research was the capacity to make a difference. Here again, our findings suggest that the debates played a positive role in enhancing voters' confidence and efficacy. That role may well be greater than we have been able to identify in our study. In 2010 the Liberal Democrat leader promised during the TV debates that he would oppose any increase in university tuition fees. His party's failure to keep that promise was punished by the electorate in 2015. During the 2015 debates – specifically on the BBC *Question Time* programme, shortly before polling day – the Conservative leader promised that he would not cut child tax credits. Once elected, a cut was proposed and some of his critics, including members of the House of Lords, have questioned the government's legitimacy in pursuing a policy that was rejected during the pre-election debate. It is too early to say how this will play out, but should it transpire that what party leaders say on the platforms of TV election debates acquires a quasi-constitutional legitimacy, that would be likely to boost the confidence of debate-watching citizens. It certainly puts the notion of 'entitlement' into some perspective.

#### **4.3 Some implications for future research**

A number of possibilities for future research present themselves from our study. First, while we have demonstrated an important relationship between the debates and the democratic entitlements, future research could examine the role other media and political practices play. TV election debates are just one part of a broader political communication ecology. We can expect the democratic entitlements we have identified to be influenced by changes in the political environment and by a wide range of media content and practices other than the TV debates. In order to develop a more comprehensive account of democratic entitlements, we need to understand how different media and political practices contribute to enhancing (or diminishing) people's entitlements. Comparative research across countries may be valuable in identifying the particular aspects of different media and political systems that have most bearing on democratic entitlements. However, such comparative research would need to be conducted sensitively. While we believe the entitlements we have identified capture significant dimensions of democratic citizenship, we formulated them through research with citizens in the UK. Research in other contexts may well result in different conceptions and expressions of democratic entitlements.

Second, future research could go further than we have been able to in exploring how different social groups relate to the entitlements. We found some evidence of differences among groups, including, for example, a significant disparity between younger and older respondents. In chapter 2, we gave three reasons why older respondents may tend to be more negative than younger

people in relation to the entitlements. First, given their patterns of media use, older respondents may be more exposed to the most off-putting aspects of political communication. Second, older respondents may have become more jaded with political talk over time. Third, older respondents, who will have started to watch television when hopes for it as a democratic medium were comparatively high (cf. Blumler and McQuail, 1968; Gurevitch et al., 2009), may have become disillusioned after the reality of televised political communication fell short of expectations. Which, if any, of these hypotheses helps to explain the differences between younger and older age groups is an empirical question that can only be explored and addressed through subsequent research.

Third, future research might benefit from examining the democratic entitlements through other methodological lenses and approaches. We believe our surveys have captured important aspects of the relationship between the debates and democratic entitlements, but surveys can only provide a broad-brush picture. Qualitative research methods, such as focus groups, unstructured interviews, research diaries, and observations, can supplement survey data by providing a thicker and more nuanced account of how particular citizens experience and relate to the debates. Furthermore, where our surveys only tell us about people's general impressions before or after the debates have happened, there are novel attempts to analyse how audiences react to specific moments and performances *during* the debates. Existing methods such as 'the worm', sometimes used by broadcasters, and the analysis of social media data, can be used to measure the reactions of audiences in real time, but the feedback generated by both methods is limited. 'The worm' limits viewers to rating the extent to which they either like or dislike what they are watching. As discussed in chapter 3, the analysis of social media data may provide powerful insights into the reaction of audiences, but it remains at an early stage of development. Two of the authors of this report (Stephen Coleman and Giles Moss), working with colleagues at the University of Leeds (Paul Wilson) and the Open University (Anna De Liddo and Brian Plüss), have developed a new method for generating instant audience feedback ('Democratic Reflection') (Coleman et al., 2014a). Accessed through a web app on a computer or mobile device, Democratic Reflection allows viewers to provide feedback to the debates in real time using twenty statements related to the five entitlements. As such, Democratic Reflection goes beyond the feedback generated by 'the worm' by showing how different moments of the debate relate to the needs of audiences as democratic citizens. During the first (ITV) debate, Democratic Reflection was trialled with a diverse (if not fully representative) panel of 242 viewers. The dataset generated from the experiment was vast, with participants generating 51973 responses during the debate in total. The analysis of this rich dataset will be presented in forthcoming published research, contributing to our understanding of how TV elections debates relate to the needs of viewers as democratic citizens.

#### 4.4 Some implications for future TV election debates

After being reminded in the poll following the first (ITV debate) that there was not going to be a 'direct debate between Ed Miliband and David Cameron' during the election campaign, 47% of the respondents said it was 'wrong' that they 'will not be debating one-on-one', 29% that it was 'right' for them not to do so and 25% didn't know. And when asked in the post-election survey, 'If there are to be debates in future General Election campaigns, who do you think should be responsible for arranging the number and rules of the debates?', 51% opted for 'an independent administrative body', 29% said that the broadcasters together with the political parties should decide, and 21% didn't know.

It is now time to move on from the debate about whether election debates are worthwhile. We have now had TV debates in the UK in two general election campaigns and on both occasions the

most striking conclusion from research was that they were good for democratic citizenship. We think that the default assumption should now be that debates happen. It is perfectly reasonable for parties to argue about the arrangements for future debates, but that they will happen should now be accepted as a matter of principle.

The next UK general election will be in 2020. The Conservative, Labour and Liberal Democrat parties (and maybe others) will each be led into that campaign by different leaders from those who participated in the 2015 debates. It would be helpful if every party leader could make a public commitment to taking part in TV debates. Once that has happened, early negotiation about arrangements can commence. While the majority of our respondents felt that an independent body should be responsible for organising the debates, we acknowledge the broadcasters' concerns about outside bodies appearing to impose upon their independence. An early public concordat might obviate the need for an independent debates' organiser. Before 2020 there will be the referendum on the UK's membership of the European Union. This is the kind of complex political issue that calls for one or more TV election debates. Learning from 2015, we think that such debates should be pluralistic in their formats.

One area in which there is scope for experimentation relates to digital communication. There is no evidence to suggest that putting the TV debates online or running election debates as online events (as YouTube and CNN have done in recent US presidential elections) makes much difference to their reception. The valuable possibilities raised by digital communication are twofold. Digital communication could (1) turn the debates from spectacles in which the debaters speak monologically to or at a remote audience to a more dialogical and interactive event and (2) extend opportunities to scrutinize and evaluate the arguments and policies of the leaders in the period following the debate. As for interactivity, we have found a sizeable number of people use social media to discuss the debates and seek the views of others and this social media commentary is referred to in media coverage (see chapter 3), but the influence of audience participation on the events themselves is limited. We would like to see the broadcasters, newspapers and social media companies – as well as civic entrepreneurs – continue to experiment imaginatively with ways to make the events more interactive. What about the post-debate period? The online content relating to the debates produced by broadcasters and newspapers in 2015 was largely explanatory: this is who the debaters are; this is what to expect from them; this is how to interpret their body language. With the exception of a few fact-checking sites, voters were offered few opportunities to analyse and interrogate the debates for themselves while they were happening or shortly afterwards. The same research team who designed the new method of audience feedback discussed above are developing a digital tool (Democratic Replay) that allows people to replay the debates and scrutinise the claims that politicians make (Coleman et al., 2014b). Users are able to search for particular moments, themes and strategies in the debate; the ways in which the leaders use language to persuade or manipulate; the extent to which their arguments are consistent – and relate to what other politicians are saying; the differences between the principles and policies set out by politicians; and how other people have responded to particular moments and statements. Based on a combination of technologies, this tool will be launched before the forthcoming referendum on European Union membership. This is only one tool, designed to enable citizens to carry out a certain range of actions that were unavailable to them in the past. We hope others will design more tools and platforms that will allow citizens to realise their democratic entitlements before, during and after future TV debates.

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Finally, we consider that the findings we have presented in this report have implications that go beyond the organisation of occasional TV election debates. We put forward the gist of four of them here to encourage their consideration, especially by those who are on the hectic front-line of the democratic process – leading politicians and journalists:

- 1) Debate is not just a bonus for democracy, but an essential element of it. Enabling as many voices as possible to be heard in the public arena, with time to state their views and air their differences, is not a turn-off for citizens but a spur to engage. If that is so, more venues in the media for clarifying debate (not only during election campaigns) would be welcome, as would fewer references to disagreements as ‘splits’, ‘rows’ and ‘challenges to authority’. Encouraging open debate without penalty for the protagonists would contribute to a more mature style of democracy.
- 2) Disappointment among citizens over not being spoken to and understood on their own terms seems rife and obdurate. Seeking and prioritising ways to bridge that gap would be welcome. It would be well to appreciate that Westminster insiders’ fascination for the Ins and Outs of the political game is not shared to the same degree by members of the public, for whom the key question will often be, ‘Why does this social problem matter and what can be done about it?’.
- 3) There is widespread lack of trust in much of what politicians and journalists have to say. There is no quick fix for this condition, and in any case a considered wariness about truth claims is more suitable than a naïve gullibility. But it could help greatly if high-profile political consultants’ and communication advisors’ power and authority were pegged down more than a jot. Their stock in trade is the ‘principle’ that, ‘If it works, anything goes!’. And that favours manipulation, which eventually becomes visible and consequently manufactures oxygen for cynicism.
- 4) The kind of basic entitlements that we have discussed in this report ‘are for real’ and a long-term commitment to serve them would be desirable. Over the next few years, a number of crucially important decisions will need to be considered, including the UK’s future relationship to the European Union, the constitutional status of the nations within the UK, the political leadership of major cities and the election of the next government in 2020. How these issues are debated and how far the British public is engaged in such debates and feel capable of responding confidently to them, will provide significant indications of the health of our democracy.

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## Appendix

The following are summary tables for each of the key regression analyses carried out. The tables are ordered by the final column (i.e. by effect size) from largest to smallest.

### Intentions to view (pre first debate)

Variable	p-value	Partial Eta Squared
Political interest	<0.01	0.19
Mean Entitlement	<0.01	0.14
Age	0.01	0.01
Education	0.10	0.01
Mean Pejorative	0.01	0.00
Gender	0.21	0.00
Socio-economic group	0.53	0.00
Mean Charitable	0.10	0.00
Voting intention	0.97	0.00
R Squared = 0 .40		

### Reasons to watch the debates (pre first debate)

Variable	p-value	Partial Eta Squared
Political interest	<0.01	0.02
Mean Entitlement	<0.01	0.01
Gender	0.01	0.01
Age	0.21	0.01
Socio-economic group	0.65	0.00
Mean Pejorative	0.85	0.00
Mean Charitable	0.62	0.00
R Squared = 0 .04		

**Reasons to not watch the debates (pre first debate)**

Variable	p-value	Partial Eta Squared
Age	<0.01	0.07
Mean Pejorative	<0.01	0.03
Mean Entitlement	<0.01	0.02
Political interest	0.03	0.01
Gender	0.55	0.00
Socio-economic group	0.94	0.00
Mean Charitable	0.75	0.00
R Squared = 0 .17		

**Becoming more interested (post first debate)**

Variable	p-value	Partial Eta Squared
Political interest	<0.01	0.05
Age	<0.01	0.04
Education	<0.01	0.01
Socio-economic group	0.03	0.01
Gender	0.55	0.00
R Squared = 0 .24		

**Learning about party policies (post first debate)**

Variable	p-value
Mean Entitlement	<0.01
Political interest	<0.01
Gender	<0.01
Socio-economic group	0.33
Age	0.43
Pseudo-R squared (Nagelkerke) = 0.26	

(this is a logistic regression as the response is dichotomous)

**Charitable images (post election)**

<b>Variable</b>	<b>p-value</b>	<b>Partial Eta Squared</b>
Mean Entitlements	<0.01	0.23
Age	<0.01	0.02
Socio-economic group	0.02	0.01
Education	0.64	0.00
Political interest	0.79	0.00
Gender	0.42	0.00
R Squared =0 .26		

**Pejorative images (post election)**

<b>Variable</b>	<b>p-value</b>	<b>Partial Eta Squared</b>
Entitlements_6	<0.01	0.11
Socio-economic group	<0.01	0.02
Age	<0.01	0.01
Political interest	<0.01	0.01
Education	0.06	0.01
Gender	0.74	0.00
R Squared =0 .15		







This is an innovative and empirically thorough study of the citizen demand side of TV election debates. Based on 12 focus group sessions and five nationally representative sample surveys, it shows that the UK's 2015 campaign debates performed a crucially important civic role. It reveals how voters expect to be addressed by political leaders if they are to function effectively as democratic citizens. It measures the degree to which viewers considered that those 'entitlements' had been met (or not) by the debaters in 2015. It finds a range of effects that flowed from how well or badly they had been served by what they saw and heard in the debates. And it discusses the policy implications of the research for the organisation of TV debates in and between future election campaigns.

*"Leaders' debates only arrived in British politics in 2010 after a 50 year battle. The first encounters between just three leaders dominated the campaign. The repeat in 2015, diluted between more programmes and more contestants, made less sensational impact, but they established debates as a permanent part of the electoral scene. This study examines the voters' surprisingly favourable reactions. It provides an innovative and far-reaching contribution to electoral studies".*

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