Election Debate Visualisation

What Do Voters Want from Televised Election Debates?

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Drawing on new focus group research, we ask voters what they want from televised elections debates. Being informed about the leaders and their policies is important, but only one of a broader range of democratic capabilities that election debates can and arguably should support.

Capabilities of democratic citizenship

Both politicians and broadcasters argue that televised election debates play a valuable role in providing voters with information about the political leaders and their policies. But 'informing the public' is too often taken to be a top-down process of telling people what experts think they need to know. Rather than thinking of information as something that is given to people by those in the know, we are interested in thinking through the idea of democratic information in terms of people's own sense of their entitlement to acquire knowledge that will enable them to act in and on the world as autonomous beings. This approach begins by asking what capabilities are needed by people if they are to function in a particular kind of society.[i] Unlike top-down notions of information, the capabilities perspective insists that the utility of information must be defined from the citizen's point of view, in terms of the extent to which such information enables her to realise her full potential within a particular social context.

We conducted twelve focus groups in which we asked a range of different groups to evaluate the 2010 election debates and tell us what they wanted from the debates that are expected to take place in 2015.[ii] Drawing on this research, we set out five main capabilities of democratic citizenship that the election debates could help to enable and support.

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1. I would like to be respected as a rational and independent decision-maker

> [...] I'm disillusioned with a lot of these debates [...] Let's be honest, they've all got their little entourage who is going to tell them: if you get this difficult question, this is what you say. You can see that. You can see when people are firing things at them. They've been well primed. They know exactly what they are going to say. It makes me angry. I don't think they're being 100% honest.

Disengaged female voter

Our focus group participants were concerned about being addressed by the political leaders in ways that seemed to be deliberately designed to manipulate and confuse them. Participants felt that political leaders used language strategically, just in order to win electoral support, rather than to communicate meaning. When addressed in a strategic way, citizens feel as if they are just a means to an end, something to be manipulated in order to achieve political success, rather than respected as a rational and independent decision maker.[iii]

Participants responded to manipulative political talk in different ways: some focused on decoding body language, others on learning more about whether the leaders had consistent values, and others on identifying 'facts' that could cut through 'spin'. But all participants shared a distaste of how it feels to be addressed through manipulative communication. Politicians and broadcasters need to ensure that the election debates are not reduced to a series of heavily constructed, scripted messages. Instead, the debaters should be strongly encouraged to respect citizens as self-determining and rational individuals.

2. I would like to be able to evaluate political claims and make an informed decision

> So if they're talking about certain numbers or picking out certain figures that there's nothing there to say, "You're wrong" or "why have you picked that statistic when there's another one that says the opposite?" You find it a lot when you read the news a couple of days later. The one that they've picked is like not a true reflection.

Male advanced digital media

While elections debates help to inform citizens, many focus group participants said they'd benefit from additional and different information. Participants wanted to learn more about the policies, past promises and track records of the leaders. They also wanted ways to assess the factual claims the leaders made. Participants were unsure about whether the views of other members of the public could help them to evaluate claims, especially when expressed in crude forms like 'the worm', but they felt that it could be helpful to hear the perspectives of groups with specific knowledge and experience.

Additional information could be provided to citizens in various ways. For example, relevant background information, fact checks, and argument visualizations could be accessed via the 'red button' on televisions or via a dedicated app or website.[iv] Such information would need to be politically independent and credible in order to gain

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people's confidence. Provided this is the case, there is a host of ways in which the debates could be enhanced in order to help people to evaluate political claims and make more informed decisions.

3. I would like to feel part of the debate as a democratic cultural event

> I'd also 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. I can't see it ever happening.

Male advanced digital media

Televised election debates provide a space outside everyday routines to focus on politics. Several of our respondents said the debates had heightened their engagement with the election and sparked political discussions with friends and family. For others, however, the debates seemed to be remote and inaccessible and did not help them to engage with the broader election campaign.

Several focus group participants found it hard to relate to the debates as cultural events, viewing them as too formal and designed for those who are already engaged. They suggested different ways the debates could be made more accessible, from the use of computer animation to more inventive forms of audience engagement and interactivity. Politicians and broadcasters need to ensure that the election debates are inclusive and that different social groups — not just the politically engaged — are able to relate to and feel part of the debates as a cultural event.

4. I would like to communicate with and be recognized by the leaders who want to represent me

> I think the thing with 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 [...]

First-time female voter

Focus group participants were sceptical about whether the political leaders really knew about the lives, values, and preferences of 'ordinary' people. Given a gap between their backgrounds, experiences, and perspectives and those of the leaders, several participants wanted opportunities to be able to communicate with the leaders directly.[v]

Participants discussed different ways in which people could communicate with the leaders. Some suggested that the debates should be more like *Children in Need* or *Comic Relief*, where coverage switches from a central television studio to contributions from the public across the country. It was suggested that the audience could contribute interactively via the red button, comment via social media, or produce videos about their lives that the political leaders could respond

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to. However such interactivity is realized, the important point is that people require opportunities to be able to communicate directly with those hoping to speak for them as their leaders and tell them about their lives, values and preferences.

5. I would like to be able to make a difference to what happens in the political world

> They are all, as everybody's said, very similar these days. There's very little distinction between the three points of view.

First-time female voter

Voting is the most common act of democratic citizenship, but its power rests on meaningful political choice. Several focus group participants felt that the positions of the leaders came across as being too similar. They also felt that the consequences of voting one way or the other were unclear, since the political leaders were reluctant to discuss bolder policy proposals that might prove controversial or provide a realistic account of what the effects of their policies might be.

Participants felt that the debates needed to make the differences between the political leaders clearer and connect this with the expected social consequences of political decisions, negative as well as positive. Voters need access to meaningful political choices that carry real consequences in order to be capable of making a difference politically.

Realising the democratic capabilities and entitlements

1. To be respected as a rational and independent decision-maker
2. To be able to evaluate political claims and make an informed decision
3. To feel part of the debate as a democratic cultural event
4. To be able to communicate with and be recognized by the leaders who want to represent me
5. To be able to make a difference to what happens in the political world

Our research has identified five main democratic capabilities that citizens would like televised election debates to enable and support. If election debates are to be designed on the basis on what voters consider their democratic entitlements to be rather than what political elites want to happen, the next step is to think about how to build such entitlements into the very structure and atmosphere of the debates. We suggest that this entails two foci of design. Firstly, the debates themselves. Old questions of debate format would need to be revisited in the light of the entitlements that voters claim and new questions would also need to be addressed, such as whether the debates should be primarily broadcast events or whether they should take a multimedia form, using what are

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now the commonplace communicative affordances of interactive technologies; whether they should be based in studios or grand University chambers or should move around the country to take place in settings more familiar to voters. Secondly, there is the post-debate period: the days or weeks between the live event and polling day. This is a period in which people need to make sense of the debates and would benefit from what we are calling sense-making technologies. The EDV project is focused on the design and production of such technologies. Between now and the May 2015 UK general election we are developing a Democratic Replay website, which will experiment with a range of techniques to help voters to make sense of the debates, from computational linguistics, argument mapping, and fact-checking services to the use of social media monitoring and new forms of audience feedback (see EDV Project Briefing 2014.03 and EDV Project Briefing 2014.04). In the process, our aim is to contribute to thinking about how the debates can be designed in ways that respect and promote the democratic capabilities of citizens.

EDV Research Team

Stephen Coleman, Simon Buckingham Shum, Anna De Liddo, Giles Moss, Brian Plüss, Paul Wilson.

[i] Sen, A., 1995. *Inequality Re-Examined.* Oxford: Oxford University Press. Sen, A. 2009. *The Idea of Justice.* London: Penguin Books. See also Garnham, N., 1997. 'Amartya Sen's capabilities approach to the evaluation of welfare: its application to communications'. *Javnost The*

[ii] Focus groups are not a basis for generalisation, of course, but a form of group interview that capitalises on communication between research participants to generate data. The method is particularly useful for exploring people's knowledge and experiences and can be used to examine not only what people think but how they think and why they think that way. We do not claim that the findings reported here represent anything more than the expressed views of several groups of citizens, selected on the basis of a series of carefully selected and broadly representative socio-demographic profiles. Ten focus groups, each comprising between seven and eight participants from the Leeds area, were conducted in total. The groups comprised: (1) Disengaged Female Voters, (2) Disengaged Male Voters, (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) Female Advanced Users of Digital Media, and (10) Male Advanced Users of Digital Media.

[iii] Chambers, S., 1996. *Reasonable democracy: Jürgen Habermas and the politics of discourse.* Cornell University Press, Ithaca, N.Y: London. Klemp N. J. 2012. The Morality of Spin: Virtue and Vice in Political Rhetoric and the Christian Right. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, p. 36.

[iv] See EDV Project Briefing 2014.02.

[v] Coleman, S., 2005. 'New mediation and direct representation: reconceptualizing representation in the digital age'. *New Media & Society* 7, 177-198.