Canada’s Leaders’ Debates in Comparative Perspective
Spencer McKay
Research Associate
Centre for the Study of Democratic Institutions
School of Public Policy and Global Affairs
University of British Columbia

June 1, 2020

This report was funded by the Leaders’ Debates Commission and included as Appendix 7 of the Commission’s report, Democracy Matters, Debates Count.

1 Thanks to Candice Chan, Sarah Despatie, and Arian Zand for helpful research assistance.
Contents

Introduction: What Are Debates For? ................................................................. 3

Debate Effects ........................................................................................................ 3

   Media Coverage and Social Media ................................................................. 4

   Agenda-Setting and Issue Salience ............................................................... 5

   Knowledge Effects ......................................................................................... 6

   Candidate Performance and Perception ....................................................... 7

   Political Efficacy ........................................................................................... 7

   Partisan Polarization and Mobilization ....................................................... 7

   Vote Choice .................................................................................................... 8

   Turnout ........................................................................................................... 8

   Viewership ..................................................................................................... 8

Debate Quality and Format .................................................................................. 9

   Debate Quality ............................................................................................... 9

   Participation ................................................................................................... 11

   Moderation and Questioning ........................................................................ 12

   Number of Debates ....................................................................................... 13

   Timing of the Debates .................................................................................. 14

   Production Decisions .................................................................................... 15

Debate Sponsoring Organizations .................................................................... 15

   Argentina ....................................................................................................... 16

   Australia ........................................................................................................ 16

   France ............................................................................................................ 16

   Germany ........................................................................................................ 16

   Jamaica .......................................................................................................... 17

   Spain .............................................................................................................. 17

   South Korea .................................................................................................. 17

   Mexico .......................................................................................................... 18

   Panama ......................................................................................................... 18

   Trinidad and Tobago ..................................................................................... 18

   United Kingdom ............................................................................................ 18

   United States ................................................................................................. 19

The History of Debates in Canada ...................................................................... 20

References ........................................................................................................... 23
Introduction: What Are Debates For?

While some observers view debates as little more than glorified press conferences or suggest that they are inappropriate for a parliamentary system in which prime ministers are not directly elected (Rogers 2009, 14–15), most observers seem to agree that debates can play an important role in democracies. Perhaps the most common view is that “the primary function of debates should be to inform the public” (2005, 199). Yet, this raises the question of what it is citizens ought to learn. Jamieson and Birdsell (1985, 162-163) argue that debates should allow citizens to learn

1. What the candidate considers the most pressing problems confronting the country and how he or she plans to respond to them.
2. Whether the candidate can communicate competently about complex issues in private and do so clearly and effectively to the nation as well.
3. Whether the person will see that the laws are faithfully executed and set an appropriate moral tone for the nation.
4. How if at all, the job of president will change those answers we have received to earlier questions. How would the candidate respond to the unexpected.

This clarifies that the expectation is not merely that citizens learn about policy, an outcome that might be better accomplished through other means. Rather, debates with some interaction or clash between candidates are preferable to joint press conferences, as these debates can help highlight the differences between candidates (McKinney and Carlin 2004; Pfau 2002, 251) and lead to less scripted, more authentic performances (Coleman and Moss 2016).

These views are largely consistent with the reasons that citizens provide for why they watch debates. Citizens have reported that they watch debates in order to “learn the candidates’ positions on issues, to compare them as personalities, and to help in deciding which way to vote” (Chaffee 1978, 333). This so-called ‘uses and gratifications’ approach may not accurately capture the motivations or needs that citizens have. For instance, it is also plausible that viewers tune in to cheer on their preferred candidate and find reasons not to vote for the others but do not report their purpose as such (Chaffee 1978, 332–33; Wagner 2017, 549). An alternative approach has focused on the capabilities that citizens need to participate as democratic citizens, using focus groups to allow citizens to voice their frustrations and suggest improvements. Citizens want to participate in debates, interact with party leaders, make informed decisions, and avoid attempts at manipulation (Coleman and Moss 2016).

Debate Effects

The existing literature suggests that debates “may be the only televised political event capable of attracting the attention of the “marginally attentive” citizen” (McKinney and Carlin 2004, 204). They provide a focal point for campaigns that can enable democratic citizenship. This includes, but is not limited to, allowing citizens to influence the election agenda; to learn about the candidates, their parties, and their platforms; to participate in political discussion; and to feel capable of participating in the electoral process. A considerable body of research has now addressed whether or not these effects occur, although much of the research is focused on the United States and is largely observational rather than experimental (Zhu, Milavsky, and Biswas 1994, 311–12).
The broader political context often effects the size or presence of debate effects. As Jamieson (2015, 87) puts it: “debates are most likely to affect the votes of individual viewers and, hence, electoral outcomes when at least one candidate is relatively unknown, when many are undecided, when the contest is close, and when party ties are weak.” Additionally, the effects of debates are also shaped by post-debate coverage, interactions on social media, and other forms of citizen interaction and discussion. As a result, there is also some debate about whether debate effects are short lived or whether they only appear that way because campaigns are ongoing (McKinney and Carlin 2004, 213–14).

**Media Coverage and Social Media**

It has long been noted that it is futile to measure the effects of debates without considering the “total communication environment” (Lang and Lang 1978). Pfau uses the term “commingled influence” to described the challenge of studying debate effects “in an interwoven communication environment” where “attempts to assess the total influence of any one communication form, such as a televised debate, need to examine all relevant communication forms simultaneously, assessing the impact of any one form while controlling for the influence of all other forms” (Pfau 2002, 257).

Media coverage tends to follow an established narrative: the ‘debate about the debates’, setting expectations for candidates, the debate itself and real-time engagement, and then the post-debate coverage (Chadwick 2011; McKinney and Carlin 2004, 214–15). The debates themselves tend to be the single most covered campaign event and most studies have focused on post-debate coverage as a result (Kaid, McKinney, and Tedesco 2000, 135). Winneg and Jamieson find that about 65% of debate viewers watch post-debate coverage the same night or following morning. This number is higher for those who watched the whole debate and lower for those who only watched part of it (Winneg and Jamieson 2017, 368). Evidence from Australia suggests that even those who did not watch the debates are influenced by it due to media coverage (Senior 2008a).

Despite this emphasis on media coverage of debates, there is some evidence that citizens think that the “postdebate period of spin and counterspin is irritating and confusing” (Coleman and Moss 2016, 18). This may be because much coverage focuses on the ‘horse-race’, asking who won and who lost the debate, rather than revisiting the key issues (McKinney and Carlin 2004, 215). These features may contribute to wider perceptions of incivility (Cho et al. 2009), particularly since the media disproportionately emphasizes the negative features of the debate, such as attacks on other candidates (Benoit and Currie 2001; Reber and Benoit 2001). A content analysis of German news articles suggests that twice as much coverage is dedicated to the question of who won than to discussion of the debate’s content (Maier and Faas 2011, 81).

Debates can also lead to increased TV coverage for candidates, particularly those deemed to have ‘won’, although these effects may be short-lived (Denemark, Ward, and Bean 2007, 102). Perhaps part of the reason is that the pressure to provide polling and analysis immediately after

---

2 This is a reference to Chaffee (1978). For these reasons, it appeared that the debates in the 2019 Canadian election had the potential to be particularly influential, with several party leaders contesting their first election and polls showing the Liberals and the Conservative Party quite close.2

3 They measure post-debate coverage with the following question: “Did you watch, follow, or listen to any of the news discussions right after the debate or the next morning?” (Winneg and Jamieson 2017, 368).
the election leads to conclusions that do not hold up upon reflection (Chadwick 2011, 39). Not only do some candidates receive more coverage, but experimental and observational studies suggest that exposure to coverage can actually change viewers’ perceptions of who ‘won’ the debate (Davis, Bowers, and Memon 2011; McKinney and Carlin 2004). The influence of the media on voters’ perceptions understandably appears to be stronger for those who did not watch the debate, rather than those who did and are thus equipped to make their own evaluations (Tsfati 2003). While some evidence suggests that voters who watch the debates may learn more than those who don’t watch (Benoit and Hansen 2004), Blais and Boyer (1996) warn that debate effects cannot be determined solely by comparing watchers and non-watchers since debates appear to have effects even beyond those who view them. Indeed, media coverage and social media may play a role in determining the total influence of debates.

Some voters follow debates primarily by following online discussion, rather than watching the debate itself (Vaccari, Chadwick, and O’Loughlin 2015). Viewers appear to use Twitter to address issues that are neglected in the actual debate (Trilling 2015); however, it seems that multitasking by watching the debate while also using social media may reduce the amount that viewers learn (Gottfried et al. 2017). Journalists and political elites can also shape Twitter discussion, as they garner retweets and engage in “real-time spin” (Wells et al. 2016). These users can have large numbers of followers, expanding the reach of the debate and perhaps leading more users to tune in (Chadwick 2011; Vaccari, Chadwick, and O’Loughlin 2015). While there is increasing integration of social media into debate coverage, many of these partnerships have “digital players ended up tailoring their offerings in ways that closely fitted with the broadcasters’ and newspaper editors’ requirements” (Chadwick 2011, 31).

The effects of media and social media coverage may disproportionately affect candidates based on their personal identities. For instance, debates are often framed and conceived of in stereotypically masculine terms, as “as battles, sporting events or back street brawls” (Gidengil and Everitt 2003, 561). A study of the 1993 Canadian leaders’ debates found that, although the female party leaders were not more aggressive than their male counterparts, media coverage disproportionately emphasized and negatively characterized their more combative contributions to the debate, perhaps because such behaviour is inconsistent with gender norms (Gidengil and Everitt 1999). Further research reinforced these findings and also suggested that women who choose to refrain from aggressive behaviour may receive less media coverage as a result (Gidengil and Everitt 2003). Evidence from the UK similarly finds that newspaper coverage judged women against stereotypically male standards (Harmer, Savigny, and Ward 2017).

**Agenda-Setting and Issue Salience**

Findings about “whether or not those issues discussed during a debate influence viewers’ issue salience” are mixed (McKinney and Carlin 2004, 205). Evidence from Canadian election debates over several decades suggests that “the longer an issue is debated by the leaders, the more it is reported by journalists” (Bastien 2018, 15). There is also some evidence that debate viewers take more issues into consideration when evaluating candidates, compared to non-viewers (Benoit and Hansen 2004, 136; Benoit, Hansen, and Verser 2003, 345). It is possible that those who watch debates are simply more likely to be interested in a variety of issues, although there is some evidence that this is not the case (Benoit, Hansen, and Verser 2003, 348). However, some
of these effects may also be related to other campaign or debate coverage (Benoit and Hansen 2004, 137).

While debates may have agenda-setting effects, participants do not necessarily have free reign to introduce topics that they believe will give them an advantage. Experimental evidence suggests that viewers are capable of identifying ‘spin’ and may penalize candidates who deviate from the prompt or question provided by the moderator(s), unless the topic is also considered of great interest to citizens (Boydston, Glazier, and Pietryka 2013).

Knowledge Effects
One of the most well-supported findings in the existing literature is that debates play a role in helping citizens learn useful information. A meta-analysis of 13 studies finds that “watching debates has a positive effect on issue knowledge” (Benoit, Hansen, and Verser 2003, 339). Post-debate coverage can also increase issue knowledge for non-viewers (Winne and Jamieson 2017, 370–73). However, knowledge effects are likely heterogeneous, with viewers who know little about politics learning the most and politically knowledgeable viewers learning relatively little (Lee and Lee 2015). Additionally, the fact that voters tend to process information in different ways depending on their pre-existing beliefs and interests may affect how they learn from debates. Gottfried et al. (2014) find that viewers are most likely to learn information that is presented and uncontested. When a piece of information is contested, their evaluations of the candidates shapes whether they learn this information or not.

The process of learning from debates is likely to be more complicated in multi-party systems. Even when voters are confident that they know where the parties stand, they tend to be most accurate in their assessments on issues that parties have spent the most time speaking about and which chime with broader campaign messages (Meer, Walter, and Aelst 2016).

Yet, there are a number of methodological challenges that should give us caution in interpreting evidence about learning among viewers. Jamieson (2015, 88–89) contends that survey respondents often report watching a debate that they did not watch (or only saw part of), although this is less of a problem if researchers measure knowledge of content from the actual debates, in which case findings would underestimate the amount of learning among viewers. While it has long been agreed that it is “a mistake to attempt to measure issue learning from a debate with questionnaire items concerning the candidates’ stands on abortion if abortion was not discussed in that debate” (Benoit, Hansen, and Verser 2003, 347), this imposes logistical challenges for researchers developing research questions. Furthermore, viewers may be hearing information and drawing the relevant inferences without retaining the underlying information (Jamieson 2015, 90), although this would also understate the effect of learning from debates. However, citizens may also draw incorrect inferences from facts that they learn through debates, a phenomenon that candidates may take advantage of by selectively presenting information in a misleading way (Maurer and Reinemann 2006).

---

4 Additionally, “instruments that ask which candidate supports a position but fail to include the options “both” and “neither” will have difficulty winnowing the guesses from actual knowledge” (Jamieson 2015, 89)
Candidate Performance and Perception
Debates may change viewers’ evaluations of candidate character and their competence, although there is stronger evidence that debates change perceptions of character rather than competence (Benoit and Hansen 2004; Benoit, Hansen, and Verser 2003, 340–45). For instance, the 2016 US presidential debates appears to have done little to change viewers evaluations of candidate competency. Nevertheless, even if evaluations of character change, debates do not appear to increase the degree to which viewers find it an important determinant of vote choice (Benoit, McKinney, and Lance Holbert 2001, 267–68).

The effects of debates on candidate perceptions is likely to be determined, in part, by how well-known the participants are prior to the debate (Holbrook 1999; Senior 2008a, 453). This likely explains why primary debates appear to have consistently larger effects on evaluations of candidates than general election debates and why challengers often benefit in initial debates against incumbents, whose evaluations remain more stable (McKinney and Warner 2013, 246–47, 254; Yawn and Beatty 2000, 280). Since Canada does not have primary debates, it may be the case that the effects of the leaders’ debates may be larger. On the other hand, there is some evidence from the US and Canada that incumbents are not disadvantaged by debates (Blais and Perrella 2008).

Political Efficacy
Political information efficacy is “the level of confidence one has in their political knowledge and that one possesses sufficient knowledge to engage the political process through such behaviors as voting and persuading others how to vote” (McKinney and Warner 2013, 242). Debates have been shown to increase voters’ confidence and may be more effective than other efforts for young voters (McKinney, Rill, and Thorson 2014).

Partisan Polarization and Mobilization
Debates generally reinforce existing vote choice and party identity, although there are circumstances under which debates can lead partisans to support an out-party candidate (Senior 2008a, 456). Debates have little effect on outparty viewers although “debates do enhance support from the partisan ingroup and […] the nature of this effect varies considerably across debates” (Warner et al. 2019, 13). Jamieson and Birdsell (1988) similarly point out that “debates don’t very often convert partisans on one side to the other” (p. 161).

A quasi-experimental study suggests that the effects of polarization are largest among viewers who are least polarized to begin with, suggesting that debates allow them to resolve uncertainty and ambivalence in ways that might produce more political engagement (McKinney and Warner 2013). This may be because partisans process information in a biased way, which makes debates polarizing events as they are forced to “experience messages with which they may disagree” (Warner and McKinney 2013, 519).

Debate exposure appears to increase political talk and discussing the debate with others may change voters’ perceptions of who ‘won’ the debate (Tsfati 2003, 78). Evidence suggests “that

---

5 Measured with the following question: “Which of the two major party candidates is qualified to be president of the United States: Hillary Clinton, Donald Trump, neither, or both equally (pre- and postdebates)"
the reinforcement effects may occur partly due to political conversation encouraged by negative, debate induced emotions about the opposed candidate” (Cho and Choy 2011, 795). On the other hand, these effects might be driven by other campaign activities or post-debate media coverage (Cho and Ha 2012, 201).

**Vote Choice**

Despite some disagreement about whether the importance of party leaders has increased over time or not, party leaders in Westminster democracies appear to impact vote choice, even for those who do not vote directly for the leader (Senior 2008a, 44–45; Bittner 2018; Gidengil et al. 2000). Evidence from several countries suggests that leaders’ debates can influence vote choice, although the effect may be larger for non-partisans than partisans (Blais et al. 2003; Maier and Faas 2011, 88; Senior 2008a, 456–58). Debates may also be capable of increasing voters’ confidence in their vote choice (Benoit, McKinney, and Lance Holbert 2001).

How big of an effect do debates have? It may depend on the context of the election and the margin by which the public perceives a particular candidate to have ‘won’ the debate (Senior 2008a, 460–62). Among a US student sample, roughly 87% of respondents do not change their anticipated vote choice immediately after watching a debate, although much larger changes occur among those who watch primary election debates (McKinney and Warner 2013, 245–46). Evidence from the 1988 Canadian election finds that the debates were responsible for a shift in votes of somewhere between 6 and 12 percentage points between the 2nd and 3rd place parties (Blais and Boyer 1996, 161). Blais et al. find that in the 2000 election, “the debate produced a permanent increase of four points in both [Joe] Clark’s ratings and Conservative vote intentions” (Blais et al. 2003, 46).

Partisans tend to evaluate their own party’s candidates positively; however, voters who believe that a different party’s leader won the debate do appear to change their evaluation of those leaders and are more willing to change their vote (Maier and Faas 2011, 84–86; Pattie and Johnston 2011, 161, 170).

**Turnout**

There is relatively little research that investigates the effects of debates on voter turnout. Some have suggested that debates may increase turnout by mobilizing voters who are not generally interested in politics (Maier and Faas 2011, 83) or that the effect of debates on turnout are largely indirect and thus difficult to measure (Benoit, McKinney, and Lance Holbert 2001).

**Viewership**

If debates are to serve as a focal point in campaigns that draws in even voters who are not particularly attentive to politics, it stands to reason that a larger number of viewers would be preferable. Unfortunately, there is relatively little research that explores debate viewership. Audience sizes usually decline with each successive debate in a single campaign, but we lack estimates of how many viewers tuned in to a previous debate versus how many new viewers are catching up.

There have also been relatively few studies that look at how the broader political context shapes how many people tune into a debate. Although Maier and Faas compared survey results to
audience share numbers and found that surveys may overstate debate viewership (Maier and Faas 2011, 78). More research has been done on the individual characteristics that lead voters to tune into debates. Various U.S. studies suggest that the “Audience watching all of a given debate was older, more educated, had higher household incomes, and expressed stronger party identification in comparison to non-viewers”, as are those who are following the campaign closely (Kenski and Hall Jamieson 2011, 319; Kenski and Stroud 2005). Evidence from Germany largely confirms these findings, suggesting that political interest, party identification, and age drive the choice to tune in (Maier and Faas 2011, 80–81).

Debate Quality and Format
Theoretically, we have good reasons to believe that the effects of debates will be shaped not only by the broader public context, but also the quality and content of the debates themselves. These features are shaped by various choices about the debate format, such as who participates, who moderates, and who poses questions. Both citizens and experts have indicated how they believe debates should be designed in order to produce political events that attract attention and allow voters to learn what they need to know to act as citizens. McKinney and Carlin argue that debates suffer from “insufficient opportunity for follow-up questioning, thus allowing candidates to avoid responding to particular queries, or tight controls on candidate responses that prohibit direct candidate exchange or clash, thus limiting comparison of campaign issues” (McKinney and Carlin 2004, 219). This conclusion is also based on several years worth of focus group discussions that generally find that citizens “prefer a debate series featuring a variety of debate formats” and wish to see more discussion of issues of public interest rather than candidate character (McKinney and Carlin 2004, 220). However, citizens also think of debates as opportunities for candidates to be held accountable, seeing them as akin to a job interview (Coleman and Moss 2016, 9), and raising the need for citizen involvement in the debate process.

An influential white paper by the Racine Group (The Racine Group 2002, 214) suggested that future research should focus more on the format of the debates:

“Over the past decade, especially, we have experimented with formats including the single moderator, the town hall, and the talk show. Research is needed on the differential effects of these and other possible formats. On the other hand, we have not experimented to a significant degree with such format variables as length of statements, opportunity for follow-up questions and answers, and specificity of topics for debate. In the abstract, we can imagine changes in each of these variables that would seem to facilitate more focused clash, more probing discussions, and more sustained interaction. Whether these results actually occur and whether they correlate with improved voter learning and satisfaction are questions needing to be tested.”

Debate Quality
While there is an increasing amount of research that focuses on the differential effects of debate formats on issue salience, learning, political efficacy, or vote choice, many of these studies neglect to account for the quality of debate. That is, we may expect that some portion of the effects of format changes operate through their capacity to change the quality of debate. For instance, it seems plausible that citizens may learn more when debates are of high quality. Yet, the standards of political debate are distinctly – and appropriately – different than the standards
of, say, academic debate (Cho and Choy 2011, 792). How then, should we assess the quality of debate?

Several scholars have suggested that theories of deliberative democracy provide insight into how to measure debate quality. For instance, Coleman writes that “debate without voting would be insufficient for the realization of democracy, as would be voting without any public deliberation” (Coleman 2000, 1). Similarly, Marien et al. (2019, 3–4) worry that debates create incentives for soundbites rather than policy deliberation in ways that encourage uncivil discussion that ultimately reduces political learning and increases cynicism. It appears that deliberative standards for debates have long been implicitly held by voters (Rowland 2018) and earlier studies that compared televised debates against other forms of political communication in terms of their capacity to provide justifications (The Racine Group 2002, 207).

Empirical studies of deliberation often apply the deliberative quality index (DQI), which measures interruptions, the provision of justifications, the degree to which justifications refer to the common good, expressions of (dis)respect, the acknowledgement of counterarguments, and indicators of a search for consensus. There is also wide acknowledgement that a modification of the DQI is necessary since debates are embedded within strategic and competitive election campaigns where the search for consensus is unlikely and perhaps even inappropriate. Davidson et al. outline the three aspects of deliberation that debates appear most capable of addressing – providing justifications, responding to counterarguments, and reasoning around the common good – but conclude from their content analysis that the main advantage of debates, in comparison to debates in the House of Commons, is that “participants felt much more often compelled to justify their positions” (Davidson et al. 2017, 197).

However, Davidson et al. (2017, 198) suggest that the DQI alone understates the benefits of election debates, suggesting the need to add an additional criterion: “the degree to which they encourage public debate and participation in other areas of the deliberative system.” Indeed, studies suggest that debates can lead citizens to discuss politics with their friends and family, although not their co-workers (Cho and Choy 2011; Cho and Ha 2012). This approach suggests the need to consider how debates are integrated with other democratic institutions. A recent study investigating the deliberative quality of election debates in the UK, Germany, and the Netherlands found that despite having more “Electoral rules that foster power-sharing do not seem to enhance the deliberative qualities of televised debates” (Marien, Goovaerts, and Elstub 2019, 16). Others have proposed having a representative panel of citizens deliberate about questions to be asked during the debates or to have the debates precede a national ‘Deliberation Day’ (Ackerman and Fishkin 2004).

However, the lack of movement in the polls after the 2016 presidential debates suggests that voters, at least in the United States, may not punish candidates who do not “lay out their positions, provide evidence for those positions, and treat their opponent respectfully” (Rowland 2018, 90). This raises questions about whether debates are capable of accomplishing their apparent functions of connecting voters and political elites. Indeed, disrespectful comments or

---

6 Other studies measure combative debate performances with indicators such as use of the pronoun ‘you’, referring to other leaders by name, interrupting other speakers, pointing, or making a clenched fist (Gidengil and Everitt 1999, 53).
unjustified assertions may receive substantial coverage in post-debate discussion and media coverage, propelled in part by candidates who amplify their own positive press and engage in feuding that draws attention (Cornfield 2017). Marien et al. (2019, 3) contend that these kinds of non-deliberative discourses may undermine the capacity of debates to educate citizens. More empirical investigation of this possibility is required, although the 2016 US Presidential debate offers a suggestive example of how candidates can misinform. In the debate Donald Trump misrepresented Hilary Clinton’s position on the Trans Pacific Partnership and post-debate surveys revealed a “significant increase in the number of viewers who [wrongly] believed that Hillary Clinton supported TPP” (Winneg and Jamieson 2017, 374).

Participation

Much of the anticipation and controversy that precedes debates concerns who will participate. Incumbents often have little to gain from participating while new parties and small parties are frequently excluded. Accommodating a greater number of participants can be done through several different formats and may have effects on voter learning. However, it is not only the number of participants that matters, but also their manner of interacting with other candidates.

The National Democratic Institute (2019) points out that participation criteria are often controversial and so debate sponsoring organizations should be transparent about the criteria, use multi-faceted criteria, and be prepared for legal challenges and public criticism. They outline several commonly used types of criteria, such as evidence of public support (e.g. poll results, official party status), organized political force (e.g. national party structure, raised a threshold amount of money through fundraising), legal eligibility to run for office, and a commitment to non-violence. Where there are multiple debates, different debates may have different participation criteria. Rogers (2009, 42) contends that the French- and English-language debates should both apply the participation thresholds on the basis of support in predominantly French and English ridings.

There is some debate about whether the participation of party leaders should be compulsory, in particular because the incumbent prime minister often has the smallest incentive to participate but the prime minister’s refusal to participate can also scuttle the planning of debates. Some countries, such as Ukraine (Rogers 2009, 39) compel participation by party leaders. Several unsuccessful legislative proposals in the United States have attempted to compel participation by making receipt of federal funding dependent on participation (Eisner 1993, 981) and South Korea has considered similar proposals (National Election Commission 2017). Existing research does not address the effect of the party system on participation. In other words, it seems plausible that debates may still take place where there are multiple other parties willing to participate and this may even increase the amount of pressure on those who would refuse.

What are the effects of more inclusive participation criteria? A study of the United Kingdom’s 2015 election debates indicates that including the leaders of small challenger parties may broaden the scope of debate topics (Allen, Bara, and Bartle 2017). On the other hand, a debate with “four to eight politicians is likely to incur misunderstandings” since ideologically similar  

---

7 Of course, citizens are also capable of misunderstanding accurate information presented in debates, although earlier estimates that 25% of debate content was misunderstood suffer notable methodological challenges (Jacoby, Troutman, and Whittler 1986).
parties seek to differentiate themselves, “making it more problematic for voters to get a clear overview of the party landscape” (Meer, Walter, and Aelst 2016, 151).

Indeed, multi-candidate debates “reduce the amount of time each candidate has to respond, the number of topics covered, depth of analysis, opportunities for defense as well as attack, and the direction of candidates' address” (The Racine Group 2002, 205). Other studies suggest that the number of participants does not appear to change the frequency of attacks on other candidates (Maier and Jansen 2017, 556), although the particular participants do seem to affect the nature of criticism in debates. Evidence from multiple Western democracies suggests that right-wing populist candidates play a significant role in diminishing the deliberative quality of debates, offering fewer justifications and making disrespectful statements (Marien, Goovaerts, and Elstub 2019; Rowland 2018). This suggests that there may be trade-offs between inclusion and debate quality that organizers need to consider carefully.

The presence of an audience appears to reduce the amount of aggression among participants (Carlin, Morris, and Smith 2001; Kaid, McKinney, and Tedesco 2000), although evidence from Germany suggests that there is no significant effect (Maier and Jansen 2017, 555). Citizens do not appear to feel strongly about the presence or absence of an audience (Bailey 2011, 19).

**Moderation and Questioning**

While the debate format in the U.S. remained largely consistent for roughly 30 years, the U.S. Commission on Presidential Debates began to experiment with changes in response to citizen complaints throughout the 1990s. Largely in response to findings from focus groups, the CPD switched from a panel of journalists to a single moderator, made speaking interactions less rigid to encourage candidate clash, reduced the number of issues discussed in order to encourage more in-depth discussion, and developed opportunities for citizen participation.

Citizens voiced their distaste for scripted interactions and brainstormed ways of forcing candidates to be more authentic, perhaps by having moderators push candidates to “justify unsubstantiated claims” (Coleman and Moss 2016, 12). One of the co-founders of the Commission on Presidential Debates agrees, suggesting the need for a debate “without canned speeches, and with opportunities for the candidates to question one another and for citizens to question candidates directly” (Minow and LaMay 2008, 105).

Citizens have also lamented the disconnect between viewers and participants, with several of them contemplating ways to allow citizens to ask questions or influence the topics addressed (Coleman and Moss 2016, 15). While it is common to have journalists ask questions, their professional norms tend to lead them to focus on references to elite sources, such as media coverage or academic research, much more often than concerns raised by members of the public (Turcotte 2017). Gender dynamics also affect the substance of debates as “issues mattering most to women voters are nonetheless muted in the debate agenda regardless of journalist gender. What’s more, the presence of a women candidate does little to improve the agenda inequities” (Turcotte and Paul 2015, 782).

The interests of journalists to create compelling news may also lead them to ask ‘soft news’ questions that emphasize image, tactics, or scandal over policy detail as well as questions that
use cynical and polarizing frames more often than in debates where citizens pose questions (Minow and LaMay 2008, 107; Turcotte 2014, 2015). On the other hand, some of the knowledge effects attributed to debates may actually be the result of journalists who “[embed] clear accurate information in the questions themselves” (Winne and Jamieson 2017, 374).

A study by Kaid et al. (2000, 174) found that in the 1996 U.S. Presidential Debates, the questions posed by citizens in a townhall-style debate reflected issues of public concern more closely than the questions asked in the moderated debate. While McKinney (2005) acknowledges that journalists can raise important issues that might not be highly salient for the public, he finds that the major issues of public concerns are better represented in debates when moderators do not screen citizen questions, when citizens are permitted to ask follow up questions, and when candidates are allowed to pose questions to citizens as well. These tendencies have been compounded by a tendency of moderators to “increasingly hijack the town hall format by interjecting with their own agenda of questions” (Turcotte 2014, 784).

Rogers (Rogers 2009, 44) argues that “Local experts, policy analysts and members of the public should direct questions to the candidates, and candidates should be able to direct questions amongst themselves.” It seems plausible that candidates would likely pose questions that reflected the same incentives as those held by members of the press: to emphasize image or scandal that will be covered in the news.

However, it is not merely the content of questions that matters but their structure. Several U.S. presidential debates “enabled the moderator to ask a series of follow-up questions and to build the follow-ups on responses to previous questions. The result was a longer period of time spent on an issue and a more positive response for the format and for the information received by the viewers” (The Racine Group 2002, 205). However, the Racine Group also notes that follow-up questions are often omitted from multi-candidate debates due to time constraints (The Racine Group 2002, 205). Evidence from the United Kingdom also suggests that viewers wish to see follow-up questions – from both citizens and moderators – particularly on issues where “leaders themselves may be reluctant to engage with each other” (Bailey 2011, 19).

Number of Debates
How many debates should there be? In the United States, the “FCC claimed that “exempting broadcaster sponsored debates should serve to increase the number of such events, which would ultimately benefit the public” (quoted in Modrzewkska 2014, 102). In Canada, there have similarly been calls for a greater number of debates, with some suggesting that “Voters crave them” (Hurst 2019). Yet, the question of whether a greater number of debates is a clear democratic good is somewhat complicated.

While multiple debates may have a large impact by allowing voters to develop a clearer picture of the candidates (Senior 2008a, 453), research suggests that there are diminishing effects for each debate past the first one (Holbrook 1999; Winneg and Jamieson 2017, 369). Multiple debates might also fragment the audience, reducing their capacity to serve as a focusing moment

---

8 Somewhat surprisingly, it appears that questions non-commercial news organizations are more likely to pose ‘soft news’ questions (Turcotte 2015, 251).
in the election. As a result, it is worth looking at the rationales that might explain why some jurisdictions host multiple debates in order to weigh the possible trade-offs.

One rationale for organizing multiple debates might be to avoid having too many candidates on one stage, which may reduce debate quality. For example, “In the run-up to the 2013 parliamentary election in Austria, the top candidates of the six major parties faced off in pairwise debates, leading to a total of 15 debates between the different candidates” (Wagner 2017, 534–35). An alternative approach is to host separate debates for major and minor party leaders, as was done in the 1993 Canadian election (Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs 2018, 8) and the 2015 UK election. Other similar proposals suggest holding an earlier debate with multiple party leaders and a debate closer to election day that only includes the two highest-polling party leaders who have a chance of winning office or forming government (2009, 44).

Another rationale is to address multilingual audiences. Since 1984, Canada has had at least two debates per election due to the decision to host separate English and French language debates (Rogers 2009, 19).

Another rationale for hosting multiple debates may be to focus on particular issues. While there is little research on this subject, hosting separate debates on particular issues may broaden the set of viewers by attracting attention from individuals who care about particular issues. However, this may not address the problem of substantive debate since even across three debates on separate issues, the UK experience suggests that “similar soundbites and arguments came to be repeated ad nauseam” (Pattie and Johnston 2011, 151).

Lastly, more debates could provide time for more substantive policy discussion. The former chair of Canada’s broadcast consortium once wrote that it is absurd that the “complexity of a federal election in Canada was reduced to two hours of debating time” (Burman 2008). On the other hand, this might simply allow more time for candidates to repeat their talking points, suggesting the need for an overall assessment of the format.

### Timing of the Debates

Some countries usually host debates early in the campaign, such as Australia, while others usually host them near the end of the campaign, such as France, Germany, and Denmark (Senior 2008a, 453). Debates late in the campaign are normally seen as advantageous to leaders who are behind in the polls, while “a limited number of debates, or a single debate, held early in the campaign, represents a viable strategic alternative to a refusal to debate” (Leduc 1990, 126)

Unfortunately, there is a relative absence of evidence regarding the effect of debate timing.

While there has been some speculation that the timing of the debates may affect the level of attacks and negative comments by participants, evidence from Germany suggests that there may not be any such relationship (Maier and Jansen 2017). It also seems plausible that the larger the period between the debates and election day, the smaller the effect of the debate will be as it is drowned out by the rest of the campaign (Senior 2008a, 453).
It is not merely the date of the debate that matters, but also the time at which it is broadcast. Canada’s multiple time zones have also stirred controversy over when to broadcast a debate so as to allow as many viewers as possible to watch it live (Dawson 2019). Chadwick (2011, 27) also describes how the scheduling of the 2010 UK election debates affected viewership and media coverage:

All three ran on Thursday evenings, in television’s hallowed 8–10 p.m. prime time. This schedule ensured close temporal integration with the rhythms of the British media’s regular politics, commentary and opinion cycle, which now reaches a crescendo with the weekend newspapers and the Sunday political television shows. BBC and ITV, the major television news players, run their main nightly news shows at 10 p.m. The scheduling meant that they could guarantee immediate post-debate coverage in these regular bulletins. Thursday evenings have also long been the favoured slot for the influential political discussion show, Question Time, which was aired as usual on the BBC soon after each debate (2011, 27).

Production Decisions
Using split-screens appears to heighten conflict as it characterizes a debate as “a contest between opponents who display their contempt and disagreement for one another with every nonverbal, off-handed gesture, inaudible sigh, and shift in body language” (Cho et al. 2009, 245). Experimental evidence suggests that some candidates benefit from split-screening debates while other candidates benefit from single-candidate shots (Scheufele, Kim, and Brossard 2007).

Some debates have also featured real-time interaction integrated into the production of the debate. Perhaps the most infamous example is the ‘worm’, which is essentially a trendline that represents the approval or disapproval of what is happening during the debate, calculated in real-time as the debate is airing by averaging the responses of a small sample of viewers who each turn a dial to indicate positive or negative responses. The worm has been used in Australia, New Zealand, the UK, and the US and studies suggest that viewers’ evaluations of candidate performance are influenced by the worm (Davis, Bowers, and Memon 2011). Other examples include live commenting functions for online viewers or the real-time sentiment analysis of messages posted to social media (Chadwick 2011); however, these tools have been criticized for being “unrepresentative, nontransparent, and in some cases easily manipulated” (Chadwick 2011, 33) given the fact that they do not meet traditional polling standards (e.g. small, non-random samples).

Debate Sponsoring Organizations
While debates around the world are united by some common goals, they also differ significantly in their structure and organization. Debate sponsoring organizations (which organize the debate) may be constituted of a single organization or a coalition of non-governmental organizations, election authorities, broadcast regulation bodies, or media associations. Both the emergence of debates as a regular occurrence and the creation of organizations designed specifically to organize election debates seem to be more likely when all parties see possible advantage in them (Bailey 2011; LeDuc and Price 1985; Minow and LaMay 2008, 63–65). This may be the case when there is no incumbent, the incumbent is behind in the polls, parties have unfamiliar leaders, or the polls show a close race. However, no matter their makeup, there is wide agreement that debate sponsoring organizations must be impartial and independent, and have a reputation for credibility that ensures continued support for debates by candidates, the public, and the media.
Rogers (2009, 40) similarly contends that, whatever institutional structures are put in place, “transparency in election debates is essential.”

Argentina
In 2016, Argentina amended its electoral code to require participation of presidential candidates in two debates (Mercado 2019). The debates are organized by the National Electoral Chamber and must take place between 20 days and 7 days prior to the election. If a run-off election is required, a third debate must be held within ten days of the final vote. One debate must be held outside of the capital city. The format is to be determined by the National Electoral Chamber in consultation with candidates, academics, and civil society groups.

Australia
Media companies have organized televised leaders’ debates in Australia since 1984 (Rogers 2009, 33). While the Australian Broadcasting Corporation originally organized debates, other broadcasters have also hosted the debates. To date, only the leaders of the Labour and Liberal parties have ever participated in leaders’ debates, despite small-scale electoral successes for other parties and calls to issue invitations to them (Anstead 2016, 518). The number of debates in the election campaign fluctuates, with three debates held in the 1993, 2013, 2016, and 2019 elections and only one debate in the 1990, 1998, 2001, 2007, and 2010 elections (Senior 2008b, 447). The format has also been altered over time, such as having one moderator or a panel of five moderators representing Australia’s major media interests (Rogers 2009, 36).

Legislation to create an independent debates commission to organize “3 or more debates between the leaders of each party that is a registered political party within the period of 3 months prior to each general election for the House of Representatives” failed to pass in 2013. In the 2019 election, party negotiations appear to have limited the number of debates, generating public criticism (Dobell 2019). The leaders of the Labour and Liberal parties recently indicated renewed support for the idea of an independent debates commission (Grattan 2019).

France
France has broadcast presidential debates since 1974 and there has been one at every presidential election except in 2002, when incumbent president Jacques Chirac refused to debate the Front National’s Jean-Marie Le Pen (Houchard 2012). The national broadcast regulator has a mandate to ensure that election debates allocate time to candidates equally during certain periods of the campaign, in accordance with laws governing French election coverage. Because France uses a two-round system for electing a president, in which a wider field of candidates is reduced to a final vote between two candidates, debates have traditionally only been held prior to the final round. This makes it clear who is eligible to participate and makes it easy to divide speaking time equally. However, the 2017 election introduced a first-round debate featuring the five candidates who ranked highest in the polls at the time (Antkowiak 2017).

Germany
Two-candidate TV debates in Germany started in 2002 in a format called TV-Duelle, and only the leaders of the two major parties—the Christian Democratic Unions and the Social Democratic Party—have ever been invited (Maier and Faas 2011). Inclusion in the TV-Duelle is based on tests measuring former, present, and probable future electoral success of the party
(Anstead 2016, 516). In 2013, an *Elephantenrunden* (elephant-round) debate, which invites leaders of all parties holding a seat in the Bundestag (Maier and Faas 2011, 75), was added alongside the *TV-Duelle*, although the leaders of the two major parties sent a senior representative instead (Anstead 2016, 517).

**Jamaica**

The Jamaica Debates Commission stages national and local political debates. It was formed in 2002 as a partnership between the Jamaica Chamber of Commerce and the Media Association of Jamaica and it has applied to be recognized as an official charity (daCosta 2018). The Commission has organised three debates each year for national elections in 2002, 2007, and 2011: one on social issues, one on economic issues, and a final debate between the leaders (daCosta 2018).

The broadcasts of the debate are fully funded by the private sector; there is no government support. All the debates have included two parties, but other parties may join provided they have a written constitution and have received either more than 10% of the votes cast in the previous election or have 15% of support in a recognized national public opinion poll (daCosta 2018).

**Spain**

Televised debates between candidates of the two major parties returned to the Spanish political scene for the first time since 1993 in 2008. They were hosted by the Academy of Television and broadcast by public and private television stations (Sampedro and Seoane Pérez 2008, 337). In the 2015 election campaign, there were four debates – two organized by major television stations, one organized by the newspaper *El País*, and one organized by a student group at a university – although the Prime Minister only agreed to participate in one of the television debates (Orriols and Cordero 2016, 479, 488). While media companies are primarily responsible for organizing debates, Spain’s electoral commission has the capacity to determine who is allowed to participate. Despite an invitation from the broadcaster Atresmedia, the electoral commission stated that the leader of the Vox party would not be allowed to participate in a televised debate “since it does not hold any seats in the national parliament and attracted a very small percentage of the vote in the last general election” (Spanish far-right Vox party banned from TV debate 2019).

**South Korea**

Debates in South Korea are organized by the National Election Broadcasting Debate Commission (NEBDC), which was established in 2004 by the National Election Commission. The goal of the Commission is to promote “policy-oriented debates in democratic elections” (National Election Commission n.d.). The NEBDC pursues this goal for broadcast debates at the national and local levels. The NEBDC is comprised of 11 people, including one from each of the parties within the national assembly, one from each public broadcaster, academics, and members of civic groups. Commissioners are appointed for a three year term.

Parties are eligible to participate in debates if they are eligible for national subsidies (National Election Commission 2013). Debates have been organized in different ways, with questions being posed by participants, by a professional panel (which may include academics or business
people), or citizens (National Election Commission 2013). The NEBDC has used surveys to
determine themes for debates (National Election Commission 2013).

The NEBDC also undertakes efforts to educate citizens about debates, organizes events to
improve the debate process, and to help candidates learn about debates (National Election

Mexico
Mexico requires that two debates are held for presidential elections, although candidates are not
required to participate (ACE Project n.d.). Debates are generally organized by the National
Electoral Institute (formerly the Federal Electoral Institute), which is the independent
government body responsible for organizing federal elections (ACE Project n.d.). The Institute
negotiates with individual networks and media outlets to arrange for the debates’ broadcast,
which the networks could access for free (Debates Presidenciales 2012). Debates are also
transmitted online, including streaming on Facebook Live (Facebook 2018). The format of the
debates has varied in response to criticisms and other entities, such as the student-movement
Yosoy132, have also organized debates in the past (Council on Hemispheric Affairs 2012).

Panama
Presidential debates in Panama are now organized by the Electoral Tribunal under section 234 of
the Electoral Code (Richards 2018). The tribunal is required to hold two debates, one within 30
days of the end of the nomination period and one within 15 days of election day (Richards 2018).
It appears as though all presidential candidates are invited, although the order of their
participation is determined through random draw (Tribunal revela orden de participación para el
primer debate presidencial 2019).

Trinidad and Tobago
The Trinidad and Tobago Debates Commission was created by the Chamber of Industry and
Commerce in 2010 as an independent and autonomous organisation charged with organising
electoral debates and with making debating an established part of the democratic process (About
Us 2015). To participate, a party must run candidates for at least 50% of the available seats or
have 12.5% support in recent polls (Kumar 2018).

The Commission has no legal standing and relies on no government support (Kumar 2018).
Without such status and without strong media partnerships, the Commission has not succeeded in
organizing a national leaders’ debate, although it has organized various local and provincial
leaders’ debates (Kumar 2018). The cost of organising and broadcasting debates is borne by
businesses in Trinidad and Tobago and public supporters (About Us 2015).

United Kingdom
The United Kingdom is a recent adopter of the televised campaign debate. Given the UK’s ban
on political advertising on television, debates are an important way for candidates to make their
platform and themselves known to viewers (Benoit and Benoit-Bryan 2013, 464). In the UK,
debates are viewed as a private arrangement between broadcasters and political parties, leading
to considerable negotiation around participation (Anstead 2016, 519). While broadcasters had
made numerous attempts to organize debates from 1964 onward, negotiations frequently broke down as party leaders refused to participate (Rogers 2009, 32–33).

In 2010, the Labour, Conservative, and Liberal Democrat leaders debated on three separate occasions in the UK’s first televised debates (Benoit and Benoit-Bryan 2013, 463). According to Pattie and Johnson (2011, 150)

The debates were spread across different TV channels (BBC, ITV and Sky each getting one) and over three weeks of the campaign: on 15, 22 and 29 April. Although each took a different policy area (domestic, foreign and economic affairs respectively) as its primary focus, the basic format varied little from broadcaster to broadcaster. They involved brief (1–1.5 minute) opening and closing statements from each leader, questions from a studio audience (which was allowed neither to ask follow-up questions nor to show approval or disapproval of the respective answers), short answer periods and limited opportunities for the leaders to challenge what each other had said.

The 2015 election included many smaller debates – including one between only the leaders of parties who were not currently in government – but there would only be one principal television debate including all seven major parties (Anstead 2016, 518). The 2017 election saw two large debates among seven party leaders, although Conservative Prime Minister Theresa May refused to participate in either debate, Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn took part in the second one (Peck 2017; Rivals attack May for missing TV debate 2017).

United States

The first televised debate in the United States took place in 1960, although the next one did not occur until 1976 due to section 315 of the Communications Act, which required that broadcasters provide equal time to candidates. A new interpretation of the law allowed debates to resume in 1976 and the League of Women Voters began to organize debates. However, due to concerns about the long-term stability of this arrangement and its capacity to ensure participation of candidates, steps were taken by the chairs of the Republican and Democratic National Committees to organize an alternative (Minow and LaMay 2008, 63–64).

Debates are now organized by the Commission on Presidential Debates (CPD), which initially negotiated with Presidential candidates and their parties regarding the timing, format, and moderators of the debates. Since 2004 the Commission has not allowed candidates to negotiate these features (Minow and LaMay 2008, 73–74). Candidates are invited to participate if they are on the ballot in enough states to potentially win the election and have more than 15% support in a set of five national polls (Commission on Presidential Debates 2016). Prior to 2000, the criteria included (1) evidence of national organization, (2) signs of national newsworthiness and competitiveness, and (3) indicators of national public enthusiasm or concern, to determine whether a candidate had a realistic chance of election (Commission on Presidential Debates 2019).

The format of debates in the United States has changed over time, although generally they allow for opening and closing statements as well as two-minute responses to questions from each candidate on a variety of topics with follow-up questions by the moderator. The town-hall
format, which allows citizens to ask questions, was introduced in 1992. Most election campaigns have featured two or three ninety-minute debates.

The CPD is a non-profit that receives funding primarily from the communities that host the debates and various corporate and private donors (Commission on Presidential Debates 2019). Between elections the Commission on Presidential Debates advises other countries on debate planning, assists media and civil society groups on the organization of state or local debates, and plans for the upcoming presidential debates (Minow and LaMay 2008, 65–66).

The History of Debates in Canada
The first televised leaders’ debate in 1968 saw the Liberal party demand that all parties with MPs in the house be present, although the Social Credit party leader was only allowed to participate for the final forty-five minutes. The Liberals also demanded that the debate be bilingual, although they conceded that interpretation could be used (Rogers 2009, 18). This debate was two hours long and did not allow for rebuttals. As a result, it has been criticized for essentially being a joint press conference rather than a real debate (Rogers 2009, 18).

In 1979, the broadcast networks organizing the debate – CBC, CTV, and Global – “decided to exclude Fabien Roy, of the Ralliement des créditistes because his party was running candidates in only Quebec, and he did not speak English” (Rogers 2009, 18). The 1979 and 1984 debates included the Liberal, Progressive Conservative, and NDP party leaders and were “conducted pairwise in three separate segments by the three leaders” (Leduc 1990, 125). The 1988 debates similarly broke down debate into three one-hour blocks that allowed each leader to debate another, one-on-one (Rogers 2009, 19).

The 1993 debates were two and a half hours long. These debates were notable because they allowed citizens from the audience to pose questions for the first time and the organizing broadcast consortium invited the leaders of smaller parties – the Bloc Québécois and the Reform Party – against the wishes of the larger parties (Rogers 2009, 19). The format allowed party leaders to make opening statements, followed by five topics introduced by a panel of three journalists, followed by audience questions, and closing remarks. The 1997 and 2000 debates were similar in length and format, although the 1997 and 2000 debates featured only four topics. (The 2000 debate would also be the return of a two-hour format that would continue with the exception of the 2015 Maclean’s National Leaders’ Debate.) In 2000, there was also a separate debate for smaller parties that included “Natural Law Party, the Marijuana Party, the Green Party, the Canadian Action Party, the Communist Party, and the Marxist-Leninist Party” (Rogers 2009, 19–20).

The 2004 debates abandoned questions from citizens in favour of a panel of journalists and tackled four topics over two hours with each question permitting both one-on-one exchanges and an open debate between all four participants. Each leader was also able to provide an opening and closing statement. The 2004 election English debates were criticized for devolving “into a two-hour, four-person, non-stop shouting match, interrupted by the occasional question” (Waddell and Dornan 2006, 246). As a result, the 2006 election campaign featured four debates, two in English and two in French, which was made easier by a long election campaign that started in 2015 and was punctuated by Christmas and New Year’s holidays (Rogers 2009, 20).
These featured a more rigid format in which leaders answered specific questions – submitted by citizens in the December debate and by broadcasters in the January debate – and other leaders could only briefly reply to those answers within strict time limits and without interruption by the other leaders (Rogers 2009, 20; Waddell and Dornan 2006, 246). While reporters dismissed the format as boring, polls suggest that citizens outside of Quebec preferred the new format over the previous one, whereas the opposite was true within Quebec (Waddell and Dornan 2006, 247).

The 2008 debates changed the format to have the party leaders seated around a table, rather than standing at podiums. The English leaders’ debate featured eight video-recorded questions that were submitted by the public and selected by a panel of journalists (Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs 2018, 11). Candidates received time to respond to each question without interruption, followed by an open debate. There were no opening or closing statements. The 2008 debate was also the first time that Green Party Leader Elizabeth May was invited to participate, although this nearly led to NDP leader Jack Layton and Conservative Prime Minister Stephen Harper refusing to participate (2008 leaders’ debate n.d.). The 2011 debate adopted a similar format, with leaders responding to six questions submitted by citizens. However, there were also some differences. Candidates returned to their podiums, Elizabeth May was not invited, and candidates were provided with the opportunity to make closing statements.

From 1984 to 2011, the debates were organized by the broadcast consortium of CBC, CTV, Global, Radio-Canada, and TVA. During this period, debates were “completely produced and financed by the Consortium. Each network provides 20% of the funds needed, and other, non-Consortium networks (Rogers, CPAC, A Channel) are charged to air the debates” (Rogers 2009, 17). While the Consortium tried to organize a debate in 2015, Prime Minister Harper refused to participate, instead choosing to take part in debates organized by other organizations, such as Maclean’s, the Munk Debates, TVA, Radio-Canada, and the Globe and Mail.

There are three commonly cited problems with Canadian election debates. For one, and the criteria by which participants are invited to participate have often been unclear. Second, the party leaders are not compelled to participate. Third, the debates have often been criticized for their format or perceived quality.

In Canada, prior to the creation of the Leaders’ Debates Commission, the consortium’s decisions to invite participants was “decision had been made based on criteria that were known to political parties and debate organizers but not the public. Moreover, the rationale for the decision was not communicated and defended in the public square” (Fox and Tabbara 2018, 18). These criteria may have been implicit, such as the claim by the former Consortium chair that “the most accepted criteria requires that a political party needs to have representation in the House of Commons as well as proven popular support in the country - which we interpreted to be at least 5 per cent of popular vote reflected in the polls” (Burman 2008). In 2011, the Consortium denied Elizabeth May’s participation on the grounds that “the Green Party has never elected a member to Parliament” (Leaders’ debates set without May 2011)

There have been several attempts at articulating alternative criteria. In 2007, the Green Party proposed that a leader should be included if their party meets two of the following three criteria: “a party must have an elected MP in the House, run in all or nearly all ridings in Canada and/or
have 4 percent of the vote in the previous election” (Leblanc 2011). The NDP at this time also called for the consortium to have "clear criteria" (Leblanc 2011). Drawing upon the US Commission on Presidential Debates, Rogers recommended that a “Canadian Debates Commission adopt a Canadian application of the Appleseed criteria, on polling results and majority riding presence, for the right to participate in each of the English or the French debates” (Rogers 2009, 42).

Making the criteria explicit should make the process transparent and ensure public accountability. On the other hand, doing so also creates incentives for parties to take actions, where possible, specifically to make themselves eligible to enter the debates.

The refusal of candidates to participate can lead to debates being cancelled, such as in 1972, 1974, 1980, and 2015 (Leduc 1990, 122; LeDuc and Price 1985, 135; Rogers 2009, 18). Additionally, party leaders may strategically use the threat of refusal to demand concessions, such as the exclusion of other party leaders, a gambit that was tried unsuccessfully in 2008. This suggests that even where there are criteria in place, even if implicit or not publicly known, negotiations between the parties and debate sponsoring organizations may override the criteria.

Lastly, the quality and format of the debates has often been criticized by academics and the media. An editorial cartoon published following the 1984 debates depicts “a man in a straight jacket who thinks he's from outer space, saying how much he enjoyed the televised election debates” (Library and Archives Canada 2017). The 1993 debates were criticized for “So many words, so few substantial answers.” Rex Murphy compared the 2004 debates to professional wrestling, while a 2005 headline complained that the “New Format Drains Drama From Debates.” The 2015 debate process was described as “unsuccessful” as “The benefit to voters of having five debates was lost as online and cable audiences were small compared to the audiences for broadcast debates of past campaigns.”

An evaluation from a non-Canadian academic concludes that Canadian debates “seemed rarely to have performed the functions associated with the enhancement of democratic culture” (Coleman, cited in Rogers 2009, 32). Yet, how much disappointment with debates is driven by a gap between idealized notions of what debates should do and the reality of partisan competition and the need for media companies to attract viewers? One of the major obstacles to reforming the debate process is the risk of upsetting the delicate equilibrium between political parties, the audience, and the involved media outlets, all of whom have different interests (Fox and Tabbara 2018, 11–12; Rogers 2009, 15).
References


AND, QUITE FRANKLY, I WAS IMPRESSED!!.”
http://www.bac-lac.gc.ca/eng/CollectionSearch/Pages/record.aspx?app=fonandcol&IdNumber=2919010
&new=8586304441911791706 (October 15, 2019).

*German Politics* 20(1): 75–91.


*West European Politics*: 1–23.


