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Leader debates 2015: don’t hold your breath for a repeat of 2010

Dominic Wring and David Deacon

There is now serious doubt as to whether the campaign for the 2015 general election will witness the kind of leader debate that dominated the 2010 contest. Prime minister David Cameron is reluctant to re-appear in a format which Conservative strategists believe undermines his status, while enhancing that of his rivals. They also fear he might be overshadowed by minor party opponents keen to promote themselves on this, the greatest potential stage of all.

Cameron has recently confirmed he will not participate in the debates if the major broadcasters continue to refuse to allow the Greens a place in at least one of the three planned televised encounters. While David Cameron has been accused of seeking excuses to avoid the debates, most other parties can hardly be pleased with the broadcasters’ proposals.

Labour is the exception because the current schedule guarantees Ed Miliband’s appearance in every contest along with the prime minister. In contrast, Nick Clegg has only been invited to two debates, Nigel Farage to one and the other possible contenders – such as the Greens’ Natalie Bennett – to none. Although this arrangement reflects media regulator Ofcom’s recent designation of the Liberal Democrats and UKIP as having potential “major party” status, both these leaders’ exclusion from the final debate also diminishes them.

The broadcasters’ acknowledgement that they partly based their proposals on polling trends has intensified demands from other players – principally the Greens and Scottish Nationalist Party – to be included in proceedings.

Lessons from 2010

The wrangling over the 2015 debates is in marked contrast to 2010, when the political context was relatively straightforward. Then, the Greens had yet to gain elected parliamentary representation and UKIP were led by the relatively unknown Lord Pearson. When the SNP’s legal challenge to be included was rejected, this removed the last impediment to the debates taking place.

But the critical reason the encounters happened was political calculation: the rival protagonists each had different, compelling reasons for wanting to appear.

The resulting and unprecedented agreement between the three main parties thereby overcame decades of impasse, which had prevented face-to-face leader debates of the kind seen in other democracies. The motivations for accepting the challenge differed. Gordon Brown wanted to use the debates to promote himself as the statesman who averted economic catastrophe. David Cameron believed he would come across as the most impressive leader. Nick Clegg’s rationale was simpler: the format afforded him equal billing with his rivals.
Clegg exploited the unprecedented opportunity presented him by the debates most memorably in the first encounter, seen by nearly 10 million viewers, which polling suggested he convincingly won. Loughborough Communication Research Centre analysis confirms the opening contest also had the greatest impact in terms of coverage. Of the three meetings, the first accounted for half of all debate-related news reporting.

Coverage was also markedly more “presidential” than it had been during the previous election. While in 2005 the three main leaders accounted for 38% of all politicians’ media appearances, 2010 saw the equivalent rise by approximately a third, to 56% in total. This increase was encouraged by debates that made Clegg a household name. The Liberal Democrat leader’s widely perceived triumph in the opening debate led to the outbreak of so-called “Cleggmania”.

It is highly debatable what, if any, impact this factor had on voter behaviour. But the development nonetheless changed the dynamic of the campaign. Predictably, pro-Conservative newspapers began to devote more (negative) attention to Clegg than they might otherwise have done but for his first debate performance. Our research found that the result was a notable growth in coverage of Liberal Democrat by the popular press (including the Express, the Mail, the Mirror, the Star and the Sun) up from 13% in 2005 to 21% by 2010.

David Cameron recovered ground in terms of both media and polling evaluations of his performance in the second and final debates of 2010. But the overall experience was a chastening one: he and his strategists are now apparently wary of facing Clegg and Farage (if not Miliband) who have much less to lose than the Cameron does as the incumbent.

The future is bleak

If the prime minister succeeds in derailing the broadcast debates it might be some time before events of this kind take place again. Here there is a precedent from the US where the format was pioneered in the 1960 presidential election. John F. Kennedy’s first encounter with Richard Nixon is often believed to have given him vital momentum in what turned into a very close race. It also made subsequent presidential contenders, notably Nixon, reluctant to participate in televised encounters that were not reintroduced until 1976.

The US is stuck with televised debates now, but the 2010 debates in the UK were an aberration, and it could be a long time before we see any combination of party leaders going head to head on our televisions. It would be a retrograde step if this innovation was abandoned after having attracted millions of viewers. Politicians are hardly spoilt for opportunities to engage with an increasingly disconnected electorate.