

Debates like this don't change voters' minds

*In the aftermath of televised debates like the one between Rishi Sunak and Keir Starmer, the question often asked is “who won?” Snap polling seems to provide a mixed picture, but in the absence of a catastrophic performance by either leader, TV debates don't have the capacity to change voters' minds, argues **Nick Anstead**. They merely reflect the political circumstances in which they take place.*

After the build-up, the first general televised debate is now over. Replicating a format first used in 2019, this was a head-to-head debate between the incumbent Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition – the person who has the job, and the person who wants it.

Before the debates, there was much talk of this being Rishi Sunak's last chance to turn his campaign around. It is certainly true that the first two weeks of the Conservative campaign have been far from ideal, featuring a rain-soaked [launch speech](#) by the Prime Minister, various botched photo opportunities, the re-emergence of Nigel Farage and devastating [MRP polling numbers](#) suggesting a possible electoral wipeout.

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But Conservative hopes that last night could turn things around really misunderstand the dynamics of TV debates in two ways. First and most fundamentally, very little academic evidence exists suggesting that TV debates change voters' [electoral preferences](#).

Second, the hope that a televised debate could be game-changing relies on the misconception that debates exist outside the fundamental factors shaping the wider campaign. The main reasons the Conservative campaign is struggling – the country's economic performance, fatigue after fourteen years of government, a perception of political chaos following multiple leadership changes, and the fragile election coalition constructed in 2019 – won't miraculously disappear during a televised debate; they are

reflected in it. In this context, the hope that a moment of rhetorical brilliance can change everything is a fantasy.

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Possibly, the most significant content in the debate had nothing to do with the politicians on the stage but rather the questions they were asked, which covered issues such as the cost-of-living crisis, the state of the National Health Service and education system, and immigration. The tone of the questions portrayed a strong sense of a country that was not at ease with itself and had little faith in politics to provide answers.

Post-debate polls have generated mixed results, although [the YouGov poll](#) which appeared immediately after the end of the broadcast showed a very marginal win for Sunak. In the context of the ongoing campaign, this is probably the best news the Conservatives have had since the election was called, but that possibly says more about their overall political predicament than anything else. The £2000 tax rise claim seemed to be the attack line that gained the most traction, so it will likely be reused in the coming days (although it is already proving controversial, with senior civil servants disavowing the data work behind it).

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Starmer probably slightly underperformed, taking too long to refute the £2000 tax increase claim and seeming to struggle with the 45-second answer format, often being interrupted by the moderator just as he was reaching the denouement of his response. You can make the case that such short answers are completely unfit for purpose when debating issues as complex as the Gaza crisis and global warming (I would agree – it is a [terrible format](#)), but that is not entirely the point. Both parties will have agreed to that time limit, so it is slightly strange that Starmer seemed to struggle with it quite so much.

But realistically, the only way the debate was likely to have any impact would have been if Starmer's performance had raised questions about his fundamental fitness to serve – something similar to Gerald Ford's famous debate claim that there was [no Soviet domination in Eastern Europe](#) at the height of the Cold War. Avoiding any major gaffes

will likely be sufficient for Labour, so from that perspective, it will be seen as a job done well enough. To use a metaphor that has become very prominent in this campaign, the [Ming vase](#) is still in one piece.

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