

The party leaders must ensure that the next set of election debates don't focus solely on England

By Democratic Audit UK

*In 2010, the three party leaders; Gordon Brown, David Cameron, and Nick Clegg, made very few mentions of devolution or of the devolved nations. **Kristi Winters** and **Edzia Carvalho** argue that the leaders this time around should take steps to ensure that the debates strike a more inclusive tone, ensuring that they represent a genuinely national conversation.*



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With the Scottish independence referendum behind them and the 2015 Leaders' Debates ahead of them, our research suggests that the political parties might want to rethink how they talk about devolution. Using focus group research done in Glasgow before and after the 2010 General Election, we identify evidence that the UK-wide parties missed an opportunity to frame devolution in ways that could be understood by voters across Britain. The knowledge and effort required to accurately separate out devolved policies from national policies places extra cognitive demands on voters living in nations with devolved powers. The exclusion of these nations from the substance and the rhetoric of national debates is a telling comment on the national parties' perspectives on devolution. We think the UK-wide parties should be pro-active in 2015 by incorporating the reality of devolution in their campaign discourse when appropriate.

The 2010 focus group transcripts highlighted several respondent opinions on how parties spoke about devolution. One sentiment that appeared was that a number of topics like education policy discussed in the Leaders' Debates were simply not relevant to them. Some people described mentally sifting the content over the course of the debates, for instance waiting for the discussion on education policy to end to see what was discussed next. Instead of the party leaders making their policy position relevant to voters in devolved nations, many voters described doing that work themselves.

We needed to verify the perceptions of the participants and we did this by establishing a few sensible criteria to examine the transcripts of the three Leaders' debates. We asked whether the leaders said the word 'devolution', whether they ever spoke directly to the voters in devolved nations, and whether they ever connected the nation-

wide party to the work of local parties, for instance mentioning a policy success in the Welsh Assembly or Scottish Parliament. In the course of the three debates, none of the leaders did. The only persons to consistently say the word 'devolution' or 'devolved' were the debate moderators.

We decided to further examine the distance between the national parties and devolved nations by examining the presumed audience the leaders were addressing. An easy way to assess this was to count up the number of times English, Scottish, or Welsh cities were name dropped during the debates. According to our observations, Gordon Brown had the fewest and also the most diverse number of city mentions (4 English, 2 Scottish, 1 Welsh). It should be noted, however, that both his Scottish references were to his home or constituency which are in Scotland. Cameron and Clegg both mentioned a total of 17 English cities, no Scottish cities at all, and Clegg made one mention of a Welsh city while Cameron made none.

Given our observations of a lack of any acknowledgement of devolution or even cities in devolved nations, it is not difficult to understand the distance voters in these regions felt from the discussions. This was a conversation that was framed entirely for an English audience with English concerns about policies that effected England and not a national debate where voters regardless of their geography were being addressed.

Based on our observations, we have some recommendations for all the parties as they consider the way to discuss policies when addressing a national audience in the Leaders' Debates:

- Acknowledge devolution exists by saying the word.
- Mention the lived experiences of people in Scotland and Wales, and not just in England.
- Devolution is complicated. Leaders should consider how to discuss it in a way to make it easier for all voters to understand.
- Connect values of parties to the policies in Westminster, the Welsh Assembly and the Scottish Parliament.
- Ask for the votes of people in Scotland and Wales.

These findings and conclusions, in our opinion, highlight the importance of qualitative research as a both a deductive research tool and as an inductive method for generating research questions. The perspectives we identified in the textual data could not have been identified using a quantitative approach. We look forward to continuing this research in December 2014 when we conduct pre-2015 election focus group research in Scotland.

Notes: The data used in the post comes from 2 focus groups pre-election and 1 focus group post-election (100% retention pre to post) which were part of the Qualitative Election Study of Britain (QESB) 2010. A total of 19 participants' comments were analysed. Half knew how they would vote, half did not. Split evenly men and women, range of ages. Focus group research design and transcripts can be found [here](#). Learn more about the QESB by visiting our [YouTube channel](#). Follow the project on Twitter: [@qualesb](#). This post represents the views of the author and not those of Democratic Audit or the LSE. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.

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