

# The debate about debates: there needs to be a clearer rationale for invitations

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*TV debate proposals should clearly spell out the rationale for their invitations, argues [Nick Anstead](#). A much clearer criteria for inclusion would make it much harder for politicians (not just now but in future elections) to play politics with televised debates.*



The past week seems to have seen the ground shifting in the discussion about televised debates. Just last week, there was serious talk of empty chairing the Prime Minister for his refusal to agree to the 4-3-2 format that broadcasters were proposing (one debate featuring, UKIP, the Liberal Democrats, Labour and Conservatives, then one with the three major parties, followed by a final contest between the two contenders for the Premiership).

Now the tone of that conversation seems to have changed. On Sunday, [Nick Clegg said](#) that broadcasters should now be looking at new proposals for TV debates. This is shift from [Clegg's demand](#) for excluding the Prime Minister, issued just five days earlier. In a further indication that the conversations are taking place, the Natalie Bennett, the leader of the Green Party, [has said](#) she is talking to broadcasters.

Recently published opinion polls also suggest a reason for this turn of events. Ironically, the debate row may be driving support to the Greens, most clearly evident in the Lord Ashcroft poll [published on Monday](#) putting the party on 11 per cent. We should certainly be careful about reading too much into one poll, but the direction of travel is also quite clear: the Green Party's level of support is increasing.

So what might new debate proposals look like? Seemingly the simplest option would be to just add the Greens to the mix for the first debate. This would seemingly overcome the Cameron-objection, although this might create some problems for broadcasters if the Greens continue to be classed as a minor party by Ofcom, opening the debates up to legal challenge from other parties that have not been included.

Whatever format new debate proposals take, they should be clear to spell out the rationale for their invitations. They need to do this not just in general, fairly qualitative way that [Ofcom defined major parties](#) (which while not directly related to debate invitations, has been used to justify it by broadcasters), but instead with much clearer criteria for inclusion, which can be used not just in this election but also in subsequent contests. Put another way, the rationale for debate invitations should make it clear at what point a hypothetical non-invited party becomes a hypothetical invited party. To do this would make it much harder for politicians (not just now but in future elections) to play politics with televised debate.

In my recent media policy project [research paper](#), I draw on the experience of Canada and Germany, both parliamentary democracies that have a long-tradition of televised debates and have done just this.

- **The Canadian example.** To appear in TV debates, parties need to have one Member of Parliament and 5 per cent in the national polls. While not enshrined in law, this broadly understood precedent makes it very hard for new parties meeting the criteria to be excluded.
- **The German example.** In 2013, Germany had two forms of debate. The Elefantenrunden (literally the elephant round) features representatives – not necessarily leaders – from all the parties with seats in the legislature. The TV-Duell features the leaders of the two major parties likely to provide the next Chancellor. The virtue of this system is that it recognises that twin function of an election in a parliamentary, which selects both the legislature and executive.

Either of these systems could be applied in the UK and produce a clearer rationale for debate invitations than the current proposals have managed.

It may be that the UK gets no debates in 2015. Furthermore, this may have very little to do with the quality of the proposals on the table and rather more to do with the politics of the situation. Nonetheless, at this moment, there is still great value in debating the debates, not just in the hope of reaching an agreement for 2015, but also in the context of future UK elections and seeking to establish precedents for the format of televised debates we would like to see in those.

*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the British Politics and Policy blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.*

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