

## New Research: How to save the 2015 televised debates



*Just as the UK's Prime Minister takes a strong position on televised debates LSE's **Nick Anstead** announces his **new research** concluding that the format of any 2015 UK debates should follow Canadian and German models in order to recognize the regional dynamics of British politics and that the general election selects both the executive and legislature.*

David Cameron's **ultimatum about Green Party participation** in televised debates yesterday put the whole idea of leadership debates in 2015 on life support. Even if all parties are acting as honest brokers in negotiations, it looks like debates will be especially hard to organise this election because of the fracturing of the UK's party system, which has accelerated since 2010. Evidence of this is found not just in the rise of UKIP, but also in the broad growth of support for the Greens and the SNP.

The problem for the broadcasters seeking to organise debates is how to reflect this new reality in their proposal to political parties. The current proposal on the table, which Cameron's action yesterday may have sunk, **is for a 4-3-2 format**. This means a first debate featuring the Conservatives, Labour, Liberal Democrats and UKIP, a second debate with the three older parties, and finally a two-way debate between Cameron and Miliband. This approach seemed to have been partially backed by **Ofcom's ruling yesterday** that UKIP was the only additional party that might be granted major party status for the election, which would give them a better argument to appear in the debates.

My latest research, **released today as an LSE Media Policy Project policy brief**, argues that the broadcasters' proposals are not the best option, however. In particular, it makes three recommendations, especially drawing on the experiences of Canada and Germany.

- **The UK should look to Germany, where are two types of the debate, called the *Elefantenrunden* (literally the elephant round) and the *TV-Duelle*.** The former involves representatives of every party that has seats in the Bundestag, while the latter involves the leaders of the major two parties. The virtue of this approach is that it recognises the complexity of a parliamentary election, in particular that it serves a dual function of selecting both the legislature and executive. A British "elephant round" debate using the same entry criteria as the German model would open up a much broader conversation from across the political spectrum.
- **The Scottish National Party (SNP) should be included at the national level.** In Canada, the Bloc Québécois participate in electoral debates in nationally televised election debates. In part, this is because they meet the accepted criteria for debate participation. As important though is the argument that separatist parties, by their very nature, make arguments that have ramifications for all citizens of a state, and that these cannot be regarded as of peripheral interest. As such, the SNP should appear in UK-wide debates.
- **Setting precedents and upholding transparency to make debates democratically accountable in future elections.** Both Canada and Germany have clearly understood entry requirements for debates (in Canada, one seat in parliament plus consistently getting over 5 per cent in national opinion polls; in Germany a member of the Bundestag to appear in the *Elefantenrunden*). This makes it very hard for broadcasters and political parties to exclude parties who meet these criteria. So far UK broadcasters and regulators have failed to set out clear, quantitative criteria for debate inclusion. This has important ramifications not just for 2015, but future elections.

It maybe that political self-interest will trump any proposal for debates in 2015, no matter how fair and original it is. But broadcasters should still be looking to other countries for innovative examples that might just help get negotiations back on the road once again.

*This article gives the views of the author, and does not represent the position of the LSE Media Policy Project blog, nor of the London School of Economics.*

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