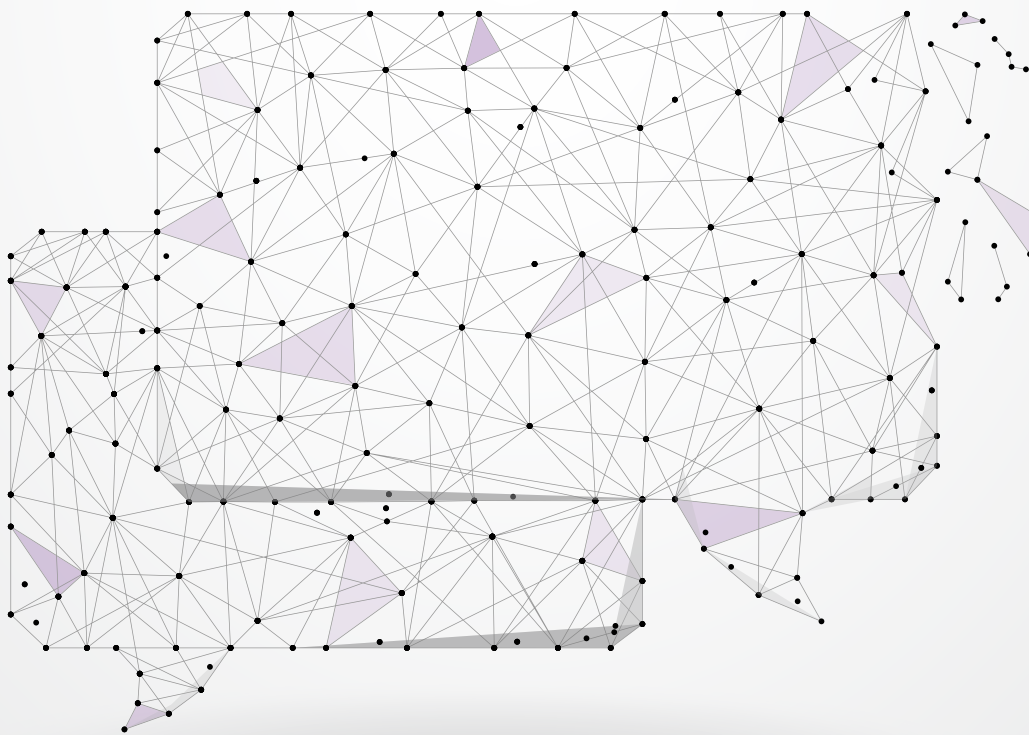


DEMOCRACY MATTERS: MAKING DEBATES COUNT FOR CITIZENS

A report on the Leaders' Debates Commission
2021 federal election experience




Leaders' Debates
Commission



Commission des
débats des chefs

debates-debats.ca



Également disponible en français sous le titre :

LES DÉBATS, ESSENTIELS À LA DÉMOCRATIE : FAIRE EN SORTE QUE LES DÉBATS COMPTENT POUR LES CITOYENS Rapport sur l'expérience de la Commission des débats des chefs lors des élections fédérales de 2021

To obtain additional information, please contact:

Leaders' Debates Commission

301-155 Queen Street

Ottawa ON K1A 0A3

Email: info@debates-debats.ca

This publication can be made available in alternative formats upon request.

© Her Majesty the Queen in Right of Canada, as represented by the President of the Queen's Privy Council for Canada, 2022.

This publication may be reproduced for personal or internal use without permission, provided the source is fully acknowledged.

However, multiple copy reproduction of this publication in whole or in part for purposes of redistribution requires prior written permission from the Leaders' Debates Commission, Ottawa, Ontario, K1A 0A3, or info@debates-debats.ca.

PDF: Cat.: CP22-187/2022E-PDF

ISBN: 978-0-660-41793-6

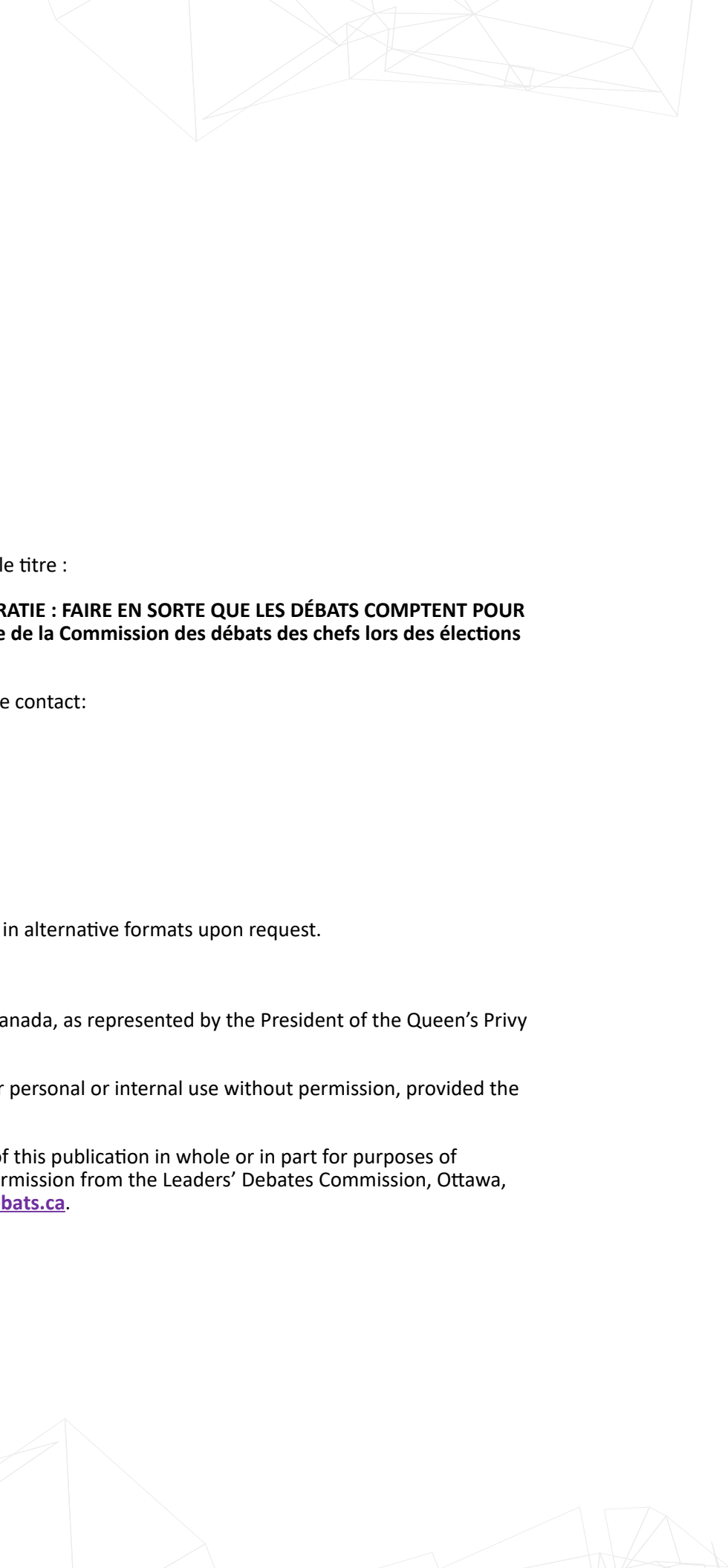



Table of Contents

Message from the Debates Commissioner: On democracy, trust and leaders’ debates	3
Section 1 - Implementing the Commission’s mandate	5
The context	5
The 2019 experience.....	5
Renewed 2021 mandate.....	6
Section 2 – Principal findings	7
2.1 Were the debates accessible and widely distributed?	7
Debate viewership 2011-2021	7
2.2 Were debate invitations issued on the basis of clear, open, and transparent participation criteria?	8
2.3 Were the debates effective, informative, and compelling?.....	8
2.4 Were the debates organized to serve the public interest?.....	9
Section 3 – Beyond 2021.....	11
3.1 Improving the leaders’ debates in the next general election	11
3.1.1 Format.....	12
3.1.2 Moderation	14
3.1.3 Editorial.....	16
3.1.4 Number of debates	16
3.1.5 Participation criteria	17
3.1.6 Measures to encourage participation.....	20
3.1.7 Debates procurement	20
3.1.8 Media accreditation.....	22
3.1.9 Languages & accessibility.....	25
3.2 Improving a future Debates Commission	27
3.2.1 Debates promotion and citizen engagement	27
3.2.2 Summary of expenditures.....	29
3.2.3 Future mandate, authorities and governance	30
Conclusion.....	35
RECOMMENDATIONS	36
Appendices	37
Appendix 1 – Leaders’ Debates Commission – Orders in Council	37
Appendix 2 – Leaders’ Debates Commission – Advisory Board Terms of Reference.....	52
Appendix 3 – Stakeholders Consulted	54
Appendix 4 – Media Coverage	56



Appendix 5 – Participation Criteria for the Leaders’ Debates72
Appendix 6 – International Lessons Learned110
Appendix 7 – Workshop on Debates Production.....116
Appendix 8 – Workshop on Participation Criteria117
Appendix 9 – Workshop on the Future of Debates in Canada.....118
Appendix 10 – Canadian Election Study – Evaluation of the 2021 leaders' debates119
Appendix 11 – Accessibility and Distribution188

Message from the Debates Commissioner: On democracy, trust and leaders' debates

Canada has a strong history of democratic government and respect for civil liberties. But we live at a time when democracy is in decline around the world. Based on a five-part rating system, the 2021 Economist *Democracy Index* concludes that only 6.4% of the world's population lives in a full democracy, with only 21 countries, including Canada, ranking as full democracies. The 2021 Freedom House *Freedom in the World Index* reports a 15th consecutive year of decline in global freedom and says that “democracy is under siege.”¹

Canada's democracy has done relatively well so far, but one of our greatest dangers is complacency, which is why informed elections that engage our citizens are more important than ever. It is here that leaders' debates can make an important contribution: we know that seeing leaders together, live on stage, answering tough questions and challenging each other's ideas and opinions, helps Canadians learn about political leadership and issues that matter. And at their best, debates can reflect our core values such as fairness, civility and pluralism.


Debates are more than campaign events or journalistic exercises. The 2021 Canadian Election Study (CES) showed that the 2021 leaders' debates increased trust in government, the media and political parties.² In an age of disinformation, fragmentation of audiences and polarisation of public opinion, leaders' debates produce an authentic record of party positions that citizens can trust and come back to repeatedly. Done well, leaders' debates are a public trust that, in turn, can help build trust.

Making debates count

The Leaders' Debates Commission (LDC) has now gained the lessons of two election cycles. From high levels of debate viewership and public discourse, we have learned that debates can potentially serve as a focal point for an election campaign. We have made some good progress on making the debates accessible, recognizing that reaching out to remote and marginalized communities is vitally important. We are also learning, through trial and error, about what can make for compelling, predictable and informative future debates. Debates are iterative exercises that require constant evaluation and improvement. Our report makes a number of practical suggestions on how to strengthen debates. We hope it can provide a useful guide for future debate authorities. With constant learning and subject to regular review, we believe leaders' debates can be a model for effective debates at all levels across the country and help set national standards of civil discourse.

¹ <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2021/democracy-under-siege>

² CES section 4.6.4



The LDC team is particularly grateful to the many individuals and institutions who have helped us so far. They have shared invaluable experience gained over many years in Canada and abroad. Their research underpins many of our findings. Their thoughtful advice has helped to shape many of our recommendations. Together, they are helping to make our future debates a better and more permanent part of our democratic system. In so doing, they are helping to gather a diversity of voices around debates and elections, and building an ongoing community rooted in Canada but global in scope.

It has been an honour to work with a dedicated team to help nurture a renewed interest in our democratic institutions through leaders' debates. This team, largely part-time, led by Michel Cormier and composed of Bradley Eddison, Jess Milton, Chantal Ouimet, Kelly-Ann Benoit, and Stephen Wallace (who served pro bono), is as professional and committed to the public good as any I have ever encountered.

We have a strong foundation in Canada to reinforce our democracy. But the endurance of democracy demands both constant vigilance and collective vigour. In the same way, building trust in our institutions requires constant attention and commitment. We are conscious of the public trust we hold to ensure effective and informative debates that establish worthy standards of civility, truth and transparency. The report that follows set out what we have accomplished, what we have learned, and what can be built for the future.

David Johnston
Debates Commissioner

Section 1 - Implementing the Commission's mandate

The September 2021 federal election was the second political cycle in which the LDC organized debates. As in 2019, the Commission was mandated to organize two debates, one in each official language.

This report analyzes to what extent the LDC delivered on its mandate in 2021.

After the most recent experience, which drew significant stakeholder criticism, the Commission must carefully assess what it has accomplished and whether its continued existence is necessary. In other words, does the LDC add anything worthwhile to the debate ecosystem that would not be generated otherwise? If so, should the mandate, role and structure of the Commission evolve to ensure improvements in the organization and delivery of the debates?

We believe that a candid self-assessment of the 2021 experience is key to identifying what works and what needs to be improved.

The context

Before analyzing the 2021 experience, it is useful to recall the context that led to the creation of the LDC in 2018. The decision to establish the Commission stemmed from the 2015 federal election campaign experience, which failed to produce a widely viewed and distributed English-language debate.

By mandating an independent Commission to organize two leaders' debates, one in each official language, the Government indicated it wanted to reduce the possibility that negotiations between the political parties and television networks would fail to produce debates, or would produce debates with limited public reach. It also wanted to bring more predictability, reliability and stability to the debates.³

Article 4 of its 2018 Order in Council (OIC) defines the Commission's role in the following terms: "In fulfilling its mandate, the Leaders' Debates Commission is to be guided by the pursuit of the public interest and by the principles of independence, impartiality, credibility, democratic citizenship, civic education, inclusion and cost-effectiveness."⁴

The 2019 experience

The Commission's work is iterative. To find the best way forward, it is necessary to consider the road travelled. The 2019 debates, post-debate consultations and our 2019 report all informed the approach we took in organizing the 2021 debates.⁵

The 2019 experience provided stability to the debates. The participation rules were made public and political parties committed well in advance to take part. The debates also increased their reach and viewership. Debates were made available in a range of languages other than French and English,

³ <https://www.canada.ca/en/democratic-institutions/news/2018/10/government-of-canada-announces-the-creation-of-an-independent-leaders-debates-commission.html>

⁴ <https://orders-in-council.canada.ca/attachment.php?attach=38858&lang=en>

⁵ <https://www.debates-debats.ca/en/report/>

including Indigenous languages, American Sign Language (ASL) and Langue des signes québécoise (LSQ). Public opinion surveys conducted for the Commission revealed that a majority of voters believed the debates helped them make their choice in the election.⁶ As we concluded in our 2019 report: democracy matters, debates count.

There were, however, areas for improvement. Our 2019 report contained 11 recommendations. The principal recommendation, based on a wide consensus stemming from consultations, was that the LDC be made permanent, provided that measures are maintained to ensure its independence, impartiality and transparency. The Commission also recommended that it ultimately be established through legislation, that its Commissioner be appointed in consultation with political parties represented in the House of Commons, and that the Commission maintain some operational capacity between elections. The LDC would use that time to maintain relationships with stakeholders and foster discussion about best debate practices in format and production.

The Commission also recommended that the Commissioner, not the Government, set the participation criteria and that these should be as clear and objective as possible and be made public before the election campaign.

Finally, the Commission recommended that it should reserve the right of final approval of the format and the production of the debates, while respecting journalistic independence.

Renewed 2021 mandate

The Commission's term ended on March 31, 2020, shortly after it submitted its report and financial statements. In November 2020, the Government reappointed a Debates Commissioner and issued an OIC to provide the LDC with an amended mandate to organize two debates, one in each official language, for the minority government political cycle.⁷

This amended OIC included three additional elements of the LDC's mandate:

- Set participation criteria and make them public;
- Ensure the debates are available in languages other than French and English, paying special attention to Canada's Indigenous languages; and
- Provide final approval of the format and production of the leaders' debates, while respecting journalistic independence.

The Government thus gave the LDC the authority to deal with two major issues stemming from the 2019 debates: setting clearer, more objective participation criteria and final approval of the debates' format.

The next section looks in more detail at the Commission's 2021 mandate and examines to what extent it delivered on it. This assessment will form the basis for our 2021 recommendations.

⁶ <https://www.debates-debats.ca/en/report/evaluation-2019-federal-leaders-debates/>

⁷ <https://orders-in-council.canada.ca/attachment.php?attach=39876&lang=en>

Section 2 – Principal findings

As noted above, the LDC’s OIC provided several objectives.

To review whether the Commission achieved these objectives, we examined the 2021 leaders’ debates and consulted widely with stakeholders both here in Canada and internationally. We held four debate symposia with experts in debate production, organization and polling. We spoke with debate moderators, producers and television executives around the world. We interviewed more than 40 stakeholders from the Canadian experience on everything from how to choose a moderator, to how to improve on interpretation. We asked for feedback from the public and received more than 1,100 submissions from Canadians. We worked with the Canadian Election Study (CES) at the University of Toronto to survey 2,000 Canadians on what makes successful debates.

This section seeks to provide a factual analysis of our 2021 experience.

2.1 Were the debates accessible and widely distributed?

The English-language and French-language debates were available live on 36 television networks, four radio networks, and more than 115 digital streams. Canadians were also able to watch the debates online *after* they aired in the language of their choice.⁸ The debates were provided in 16 languages, including six Indigenous languages and ASL and LSQ. They were also available in closed captioning and described video. Fewer than 5% of non-viewers indicated that their main reason for not watching the debates was a lack of accessibility.⁹

More than 10 million Canadians tuned in to the English-language debate and over four million watched the French-language debate. These numbers are large in comparison to both international debate ratings and Canadian television programming. For instance, in 2021, 8.8 million Canadians watched the Super Bowl.

Debate viewership 2011-2021

	2011	2015	2019	2021
English	Consortium: 10,650,000	MacLean’s: 4,300,000 Globe and Mail: 2,270,000 Munk: 1,546,000	Commission: 14,219,000 MacLean’s: ratings N/A	Commission: 10,273,926
French	Consortium: 1,320,000	Consortium: 1,214,000 TVA: 985,000	Commission: 5,023,435 TVA: 1,318,000	Commission: 4,282,628 TVA: 2,560,000
TOTAL	11,970,000	10,315,000	20,560,435	17,116,554

⁸ <https://www.debates-debats.ca/en/debates2021/>

⁹ CES section 4.3

2.2 Were debate invitations issued on the basis of clear, open, and transparent participation criteria?

In 2021, the LDC set participation criteria and made them public in advance of the election. The Commission also made public its rationale for how it would apply the criteria, as well as its decision on which party leaders met the criteria to be invited. Invitations to party leaders were subsequently made public, as were the leaders' responses.

Stakeholders generally thought the Commission developed sound criteria and applied them clearly and objectively. There was some feedback that the application date of these criteria should aim to be as close to the debates as possible and should use data that was as recent as possible. That said, the debates producer pointed out that a "late hour" determination of the number of leaders on stage could jeopardize their ability to produce a debate of high quality, as required by the OIC. It could also impact the ability of political parties to prepare for the debates.

2.3 Were the debates effective, informative, and compelling?

The answer to this question is complex and in many ways subjective. People have varying conceptions of what makes debates effective, informative and compelling. To answer the question in the most comprehensive way possible, we rely on a mix of objective data, consultations we conducted with various stakeholders, and public reaction, as well as public opinion research we commissioned after the debates.

The first objective measurement of a debate's effectiveness is viewership. As we have seen, the LDC's 2021 debates attracted more than 14 million viewers, which is five million fewer than in 2019 but more than in 2015 and 2011. The Debates Broadcast Group (DBG) noted that the decrease in viewership reflects a decrease in television viewership across the board. Viewership may also have been impacted by lack of interest in the election, keeping in mind that voter turnout was also down in 2021 compared to 2019. Other possible factors: the election was held in the summer and therefore the debates were held early in September – a busy time for many Canadians; and COVID-19 affected the ability for broadcasters to be on site before the events, and therefore there was not as much media coverage leading up to the debates as in 2019.

The success of debates, however, is defined by more than the number of people who watch them. Debates are meant to create an environment where voters can better learn about party policies and evaluate the qualities of leaders: both their capacity to explain policies and their ability to perform under pressure.

There is widespread agreement that the 2021 debates did not deliver as well as they should have on informing voters about parties' policies. The two major weaknesses identified, especially with respect to the English-language debate, were format and moderation. Stakeholders we consulted and analysis that was published¹⁰ criticized the format as being cluttered, restrictive and not allowing enough time for leaders to express themselves or to engage in meaningful exchanges. The consensus was that there were too many journalists on stage. Moreover, the line of questioning from the moderator and journalists limited the ability of leaders to expound on their positions.

¹⁰ See Appendix 4 – Media Coverage

Many Canadians were somewhat less critical. Polling conducted for the LDC by the CES show that 63%¹¹ found the debates informative. The moderation was also more favourably evaluated, with 77%¹² of viewers indicating that the moderators asked good questions and 79% indicating that they treated each leader fairly.¹³ Still, 56% said there was not enough time provided to leaders to debate each other.¹⁴ As one participant in a CES focus group remarked, “It seemed like they’re just rushing through everything and no one is really getting answers.”¹⁵

Compared to non-debate watchers, those who watched the debates experienced increased:

- Trust in the federal government;
- Trust in political parties;
- Ability to rate party leaders;
- Updating in leader ratings;
- Election interest; and
- Confidence in voting decision.

However, the same survey showed that Canadians did not sufficiently learn about the parties’ platforms during the debates. This is significantly different from the 2019 debates, when a similar survey conducted by the CES showed that viewers’ knowledge of party platforms had been enhanced by watching the debates.¹⁶

2.4 Were the debates organized to serve the public interest?

In determining whether the debates were organized in the public interest, it is important to distinguish between the organizational components of the debates and their substantive elements.

From a strictly organizational standpoint, the Commission believes it delivered on its mandate. The debates were organized according to the rules of public procurement, through an independent, public request for proposals process that selected the producer along clear criteria. The delivery of the debates was also well within the contracted budget.

On the substantive front, however, the debates were less successful in serving the public interest. This is defined in our OIC as an “essential contribution to the health of Canadian democracy.”

We interpret the public interest in debates as responding to and serving the needs of the viewing public and, by extension, the voters. Our public opinion surveys reveal that what viewers want the most from debates is information on the platform positions of leaders and their parties that helps them make an informed choice at the ballot box.¹⁷ Consequently, all the components of the debates should be fashioned to serve that need. They must enhance the delivery of relevant information to voters. This influences the type of questions that are asked of the leaders and the manner in which they are asked.

¹¹ CES section 4.5

¹² CES section 4.5

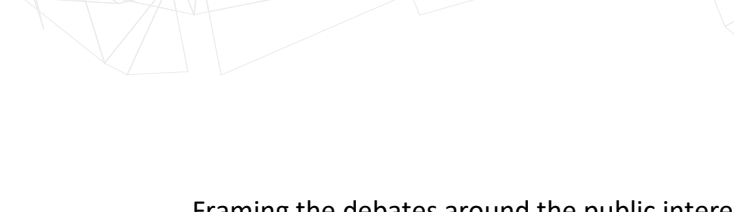
¹³ CES section 5

¹⁴ CES section 4.5

¹⁵ CES, Appendix—Supplementary Report on Focus Groups

¹⁶ CES section 5

¹⁷ CES section 4.7.1



Framing the debates around the public interest also fosters trust. According to the 2021 Edelman Trust Barometer, Canada is not a trusting society. We maintain overall a neutral attitude towards our institutions, with disinformation no doubt a contributing factor.¹⁸ By providing a safe space where voters can evaluate party leaders in a live, unmediated format, debates can help build trust in institutions and foster citizen engagement. This is especially important for communities that feel disenfranchised or forgotten by the political process. Serving the public interest includes reaching people where they live, in languages other than French and English, and providing information that is relevant to their realities.

¹⁸ Based on the 2021 Edelman Trust Barometer Country Report: *Trust in Canada*, pp 4, 7, Canadians are generally neutral about their trust in Canadian institutions (i.e. NGOs, business, government and media), despite a temporary 2020 positive surge at the outset of the pandemic.

Section 3 – Beyond 2021

This section provides recommendations that seek to improve the mandate, role and structure of a future Commission or alternative independent body. It looks at what role this body can play, if any, in improving the production of the debates; and how it can, in collaboration with its partners, better serve the public interest.

While this independent body could take the form of the current Commission, there could be a number of institutional models worth considering over the longer term. We will look at these different models later. For the purpose of readability, we use the term Commission in the sections below.

While it has succeeded in making the debates more stable, accessible and transparent, the Commission has not fully achieved the goal of what we could call overall debate integrity. Debate integrity refers to a number of dimensions: participation criteria, reach, promotion, viewership, format, moderation, choice of themes and questions, mandate accountability, audience satisfaction and serving the public interest. For the debates to have integrity, each of these dimensions must be satisfied. Integrity implies the whole is greater than the sum of its parts and that overarching responsibility for the debates' success rests with a future Commission or independent body.

First, it is important to explore what needs to be accomplished and changed to improve each of the components of the debates.

3.1 Improving the leaders' debates in the next general election

There are three fundamental components related to the production of debates. For clarity, we are categorizing them below:

Format

The format pertains to the structural elements of the debate:

- Form (town hall, open debate, etc.)
- Number of segments and determination of segments (opening and closing statements, participation from audience, panels or guests, video packages, etc.)
- Timing: length of the debate, length of each segment, how long each leader has to answer a question, how much time should be devoted to each theme, length of open debate sections
- Number of questions posed to each leader but not the themes or topics of the questions

Moderation

The role of “moderator” refers to any person on the debate stage who:

- Steers or chairs the debate; OR
- Keeps track of timing; OR
- Engages with leaders by posing questions and follows up with questions to the leaders.

For greater clarity, a journalist who is on stage engaging with leaders, asking them questions and following up with questions to the leaders is a de facto moderator.

A member of the public who is seated in the audience or is live via video feed is not considered a moderator as they are not on stage with the leaders and are not engaging with them through follow-up questions and rebuttals.

Editorial

The editorial components of the debate include:

- Themes and questions to the leaders, including:
 - Determining the themes and questions
 - The order of the themes and questions
 - The specific wording of each question

Essentially, editorial is *what* the leaders are talking about and *which* themes and questions they are being asked. Moderation is *who* asks these questions. Format is *how* (the mechanics of how the debate will unfold) and *where* (the logistics of the timing and run of show).

3.1.1 Format

There was widespread criticism of both 2021 debate formats by the media, public and various stakeholders.

Media coverage of the French-language debate focused on whether the debate had given rise to meaningful exchanges.¹⁹ Criticism centered on the following:

- Busy format
- Too many questions
- Overproduced
- Too many journalists on stage
- Little opportunity for leaders to debate

The English-language debate received more negative media coverage and was marked by controversy over both format and moderation.

Media critics said the format was “restrictive”²⁰ and “tightly structured,”²¹ giving leaders “too little time to explain their policies.”²² Commentators contended that the debate put too much emphasis on timing, had too many journalists on stage and provided no real opportunity for debate. The Globe and Mail likened it to a “press conference.”²³

Public inputs received by the Commission underscored the same issues. Citizens wrote in with the following comments:

¹⁹ See Appendix 4 - Media Coverage

²⁰ <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/politics/article-trudeau-otoole-prevented-from-launching-attacks-at-each-other-in/>

²¹ <https://www.macleans.ca/politics/federal-election-debate-five-takeaways-from-a-disjointed-but-feisty-showdown/>

²² <https://www.ctvnews.ca/politics/federal-election-2021/leaders-debates-commission-under-fire-after-controversial-english-debate-1.5581264>

²³ <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/opinion/editorials/article-canadians-deserved-better-than-just-one-lousy-debate/>

- “A debate is not a Q&A”
- “The format did not allow sufficient time for any leader to explain [their] position”
- “It shouldn't be a ‘beat the clock’ format”
- “This was purely crafted for TV ratings” and “‘gotcha’ soundbites that can be recycled on the nightly news”
- “The debate is not for showcasing journalistic talent” and “self-promotion”

A consensus emerged among the stakeholders consulted that the format was too rigid, too complex, too confusing, involved too many journalists on stage and did not sufficiently generate debate between the leaders.

Stakeholders said the combination of what were effectively five or six formats into one was difficult to follow. They also stated that the spotlight was often on journalistic talent instead of on the leaders.

Post-debate analysis showed there has been an increase in the number of questions posed in two-hour debates over time. In 2008, there were eight questions put to the leaders; in 2021 there were 45.²⁴ This data underscored the view that the debate had provided too much time for the moderator and journalists, and too little time for leaders. Others commented that the inclusion of questions from the members of the public contributed to the busyness of the format and provided limited value to the debate itself.

Both here and abroad stakeholders suggested the debate format should be simplified.

As noted above, a majority of citizens surveyed by the Commission asserted that their most important debate objective was to learn about the leaders’ platforms.²⁵ As one participant in a CES focus group observed, the debates’ objective “is to express and clearly show what [parties’] projects are, and what they are going to do for us.”²⁶ The least important factor for Canadians was the need for a debate to “be exciting.”²⁷

The Commission also received feedback about the issue of equal time for each leader and its potential trade-offs. A consensus emerged that there should be less emphasis on *absolute* equal time, but rather focus on being as fair as possible over the *entirety* of the debate. In other words, equal time should be incorporated as a principle rather than a mechanical approach.

Some stakeholders proposed eliminating the draw, the randomized determination of podium positions and order of questioning, and instead argued that this should be an editorial decision that is made to best serve the public interest.

The Commission concludes that the following format elements should be considered:

- Opening and closing statements;
- Same questions to all candidates in order to encourage debate between leaders;

²⁴ See Appendix 9 – Workshop on future of debates in Canada

²⁵ CES section 4.7.1

²⁶ CES, Appendix—Supplementary Report on Focus Groups

²⁷ CES section 4.7.1

- Time for follow-up questions to ensure leaders respond to the question asked;
- Open debate with all the leaders;
- Fairness rather than rigid adherence to equal time for all leaders; and
- Appropriate number and length of themes and questions to allow for in-depth discussion.

The question now is what role, if any, a future Commission should play in format issues.

In 2019, the Commission asked for an increased role for itself. In proposing to have the right of final approval on the format, the Commission’s intention was not to impose a format on the networks, but to work with the debates producer to develop a format that would best represent the public interest. This was not possible in 2021 as the Commission received its new mandate in November 2020 and had to be ready for an election call as early as the spring of 2021. This short runway made it difficult for the Commission to work with stakeholders to develop and test potential formats or to get stakeholders onboard with the new process.

Our OIC says the Commission should have final approval of format while “respecting journalistic independence.” In the context of the debates, we believe journalistic independence is more specifically defined as editorial independence, i.e. the editorial components of the debate as described above in section 3.1.

We believe it is an important responsibility for a future Commission to protect the editorial independence of the debates producer. But we do not believe format, the structural elements of the debate as outlined above in section 3.1., to be an editorial decision. We think a future Commission with no competing interests is best suited to develop a format that best serves the public interest. Having these discussions outside the pressure-cooker atmosphere of the months preceding an election call would also help in building efficiency and fostering trust in this democratic exercise.

NEW RECOMMENDATION

Recommendation #1: The Commission should have final approval over the format and should work with stakeholders between elections to develop a simplified format that best serves Canadians.

3.1.2 Moderation

There was strong consensus among the stakeholders consulted in 2021 that an effective moderator is central to the integrity of the debates and trust in democratic institutions.

Consultations highlighted that much of the success of debates rests with the moderator. This individual sets the tone of the debate and acts as the guardian of the public trust. It is important that they be neutral and keep the focus on the leaders. The moderator is on stage as a facilitator and is there to serve the voting audience.

Chris Waddell, former Director of Carleton University’s School of Journalism and Communication and former CBC Television News parliamentary bureau chief and executive producer of news specials in Ottawa, wrote in his submission to the Commission that “invisibility should be the moderator’s objective while holding a whistle that will be used infrequently but that participants know requires them to pay attention and follow orders when they hear it.” Comparing the role of moderator to a “referee in hockey,” he stated, “the best are ones the audience doesn’t notice.” Public inputs received by the

Commission echoed this sentiment. “I have no interest in the opinion of the moderator,” wrote one citizen. “We need to know the point of view of the party leaders,” offered another.

Media commentators, public input and stakeholders we consulted proposed that the Commission should consider having a single moderator for future debates. Citizens put forward the same view, with the majority of Canadians surveyed by the Commission preferring a single moderator over multiple moderators.²⁸

International stakeholders and debate organizers noted the preference for a single moderator is a pattern that emerges over time. One moderator can use time most efficiently and more easily follow up with questions. A veteran debate organizer remarked that a moderator should have a reputation to lose, not a reputation to build. There was also consensus from stakeholders that fact-checking should largely be left to participating leaders.

When choosing a moderator for future debates, the Commission proposes it be someone who:

- Is experienced, familiar to the leaders, understands the major issues of the campaign, and has hours of live television experience and debate experience;
- Possesses the respect and trust of the leaders, as well as gravitas and intellectual depth;
- Is able to facilitate debate, elicit illuminating exchanges between the leaders, clarify the positions by asking follow up questions, and hold the leaders to account;
- Poses open-ended questions that prompt debate and promote discussion;
- Understands that the debate focus and attention is on the leaders;
- Serves the public interest and voting audience;
- Is able to control the discussion and move it along, interrupt when appropriate and avoid cross-talk; and
- Is non-partisan.

The role of the moderator is fundamental if debates are to serve the public interest above all else. The selection of debate moderators must therefore be done by an impartial and independent body, with no other competing interests.

By playing a central role, a future Commission should facilitate the choice of moderators by mitigating competing interests of media partners involved in the production of the debates. It has become almost customary for media organizations involved in the debates to expect to have one of their journalists on stage. A future Commission should propose the selection process of the moderators be made in a collaborative spirit with the producers of the debates. Once selected, a future Commission should ensure the moderators and the debates producer have full editorial independence over the conduct of the debates.

To ensure the independence of debates, political parties should not be consulted on the moderation and moderation choices. A future Commission should exercise due diligence and procedural transparency when undertaking the selection of the debate moderators.

²⁸ CES section 5

NEW RECOMMENDATION

Recommendation #2: The Commission should select the debate moderator(s) based on expert consultations.

3.1.3 Editorial

The Commission believes editorial independence needs to be protected.

To respect the editorial independence of the debates, neither the Commission nor political parties should be involved in choosing the themes or the questions.

All editorial decisions – including debate themes, debate questions, specific wording of each question as well as the order of questions and themes – should continue to be made by the debates producer and debate moderators.

3.1.4 Number of debates

In 2019 and 2021, the Commission’s mandate was to organize two debates, one in each official language. These debates, according to the Commission’s OIC, were expected to “benefit from the participation of the leaders who have the greatest likelihood of becoming Prime Minister or whose political parties have the greatest likelihood of winning seats in Parliament.”²⁹

Following the 2021 federal election, there were calls for more debates from the public, civil society and media commentators, especially in English Canada.

There was widespread consensus in post-debate consultations that the Commission should consider organizing more than one debate in each official language to address the imbalance experienced in 2021.

The Commission also heard that it should consider organizing additional debates to better serve the public interest. Stakeholders drew comparisons with international models, notably with the U.S., France, Germany and the UK, which all organized more than two debates in their last election cycles, scheduling debates with both the frontrunners and main party candidates. For example, Germany held four debates in the country’s recent federal elections, three with the candidates running for chancellor and one with the seven parties in the Bundestag. The UK organized at least five debates in its last general election in 2019, holding debates with both the main party leaders or leading figures of those parties and with the frontrunners.

Results of the CES study show that citizens favour two debates in each language in a five-week campaign, preferring to hear from a broader range of leaders.³⁰ While this is the popular view, the Commission also heard concern that this would require the agreement of the political parties and television networks. Invited leaders may not be willing or available, and networks may not commit to broadcasting multiple debates due to revenue losses from cancelling regular network shows. Stakeholders also evoked the short Canadian election campaigns as another possible impediment to holding more debates.

²⁹ <https://orders-in-council.canada.ca/attachment.php?attach=38858&lang=en>

³⁰ CES section 4.7.8

Ratings in 2021 show that more debates may not splinter the viewing audience. The TVA debate attracted a large audience without eroding the number of people who tuned in to LDC's French-language debate. International debate ratings also remained high despite multiple debates.

Some stakeholders suggested Canada should consider looking at two different types of debates similar to European countries. They offered that having the opportunity to hear from leaders most likely to form government and become prime minister may have a lot of appeal for Canadians. International experience suggests that such a debate model works well elsewhere. In the Canadian context, there may be some challenges associated with this view, namely the willingness or availability of invited leaders to participate, the possibility of fracturing the viewing audience, and practical difficulties associated with shorter electoral campaigns. Canada's electoral history may provide some basis for determining who might be part of a frontrunners' debate (i.e. parties that are most likely to form government). This approach would require not only a cultural shift for the country and buy-in from the political parties and broadcasters, but also the setting on a clear and objective basis of two different sets of participation criteria.

The Commission also heard feedback that it should consider the possibility of organizing debates on specific topics. While there may be future demand for additional debates on specific issues (in our view a very desirable outcome), these could be hosted by other organizations and may involve senior party representatives. Such endeavours should be encouraged through the lending of expertise and by providing advice in terms of toolkits or manuals, thereby stimulating the evolution of debates in Canada.

Fundamentally, the spectrum of inputs received during this past election cycle and throughout the post-debate consultations showed that a majority of Canadians want more debates. As a result, the Commission believes that it should consider organizing more than two debates, one in each official language, provided additional funding is made available. These could be more debates with qualified party leaders or debates with the frontrunners. If a future Commission is responsible for organizing and encouraging more debates beyond the two currently in its mandate, it should have the authority to do so to ensure that Canadians are best served.

NEW RECOMMENDATION

Recommendation #3: The Commission should organize two publicly funded leaders' debates (one in each official language) and have the ability, funding and authority to consider organizing additional leaders' debates where feasible. It should also have the ability to provide advice and expertise to other debate organizers.

3.1.5 Participation criteria

In 2021, the Commission was tasked with selecting the party leaders who would be invited to participate in its debates.

The Commission undertook this task by consulting with registered political parties, stakeholders, and the public. It also considered the historical application of debate participation criteria in past Canadian elections; the 2019 participation criteria; existing public policy documents on debate participation criteria; and submissions from stakeholders, including the leaders of all registered political parties, the media and the public.

As a result of this process, the Commission developed principles to guide the creation of its participation criteria. The Commission concluded that the criteria should, to the greatest extent possible:

- Be simple;
- Be clear;
- Be objective; and
- Allow for the participation of leaders of political parties that have the greatest likelihood of winning seats in the House of Commons.

On June 22, 2021, the Commission announced its decision and provided supporting rationale.³¹

In order to be invited by the Commission to participate in the 2021 leaders' debates, a leader of a political party was required to meet one of the following criteria:

(i): on the date the general election is called, the party is represented in the House of Commons by a Member of Parliament who was elected as a member of that party; or

(ii): the party's candidates for the most recent general election received at that election at least 4% of the number of valid votes cast; or

(iii): five days after the date the general election is called, the party receives a level of national support of at least 4%, determined by voting intention, and as measured by leading national public opinion polling organizations, using the average of those organizations' most recently publicly reported results.

On August 16, 2021, the Commission also made public how it would apply criterion (iii), along with a detailed rationale.³² The objective of the release of this information, ahead of the election call, was to increase transparency around which polls the Commission would use to measure a party's level of support and how these polls would be averaged.

On August 21, 2021, the Commission issued its decision on the application of the participation criteria and invited five party leaders to participate in its debates.³³ This decision was made following the Commission's request for and receipt of advice from a Polling Advisory Group convened by Peter Loewen, who in addition to co-leading the CES for the 2021 federal election, is a professor in the Department of Political Science and the Munk School of Global Affairs and Public Policy, Associate Director, Global Engagement at the Munk School, and Director of PEARL (Policy, Elections, & Representation Lab).

All five invited leaders participated in the Commission's debates.

Stakeholder reaction and post-debate consultations indicated broad satisfaction with the criteria and the process by which the Commission communicated its approach and its decisions. Writer and polls analyst Éric Grenier commented that the Commission had chosen "simple, objective criteria that could

³¹ <https://www.debates-debats.ca/en/news/2021/decision-participation-criteria/>

³² <https://www.debates-debats.ca/en/participation-criteria/44/participation-criteria-approach/>

³³ <https://www.debates-debats.ca/en/participation-criteria/44/party-leaders-that-meet-criteria/index.htm>

be employed in future elections.”³⁴ The leader of the People’s Party of Canada, Maxime Bernier, indicated that the Commission’s criteria were “clear and objective.”³⁵

Based on its 2021 experience, the Commission concludes that having the mandate to set participation criteria for the debates it organizes is appropriate and contributes to ensuring debates are organized in a non-partisan, predictable and transparent manner for future elections. Several components of its approach to setting and communicating these criteria in 2021 should be considered in future mandates.

In terms of setting the criteria, the Commission remains of the view that debate participation criteria should be established to measure both a political party’s historical record and its level of current and future electoral support. That is because: (a) both can be used to assess whether a political party is likely to play an important part in policymaking by winning seats in the House of Commons, and (b) such an approach is consistent with the historical application of debate participation criteria in Canada. The Commission continues to believe that political parties should only be required to meet the criteria for one or the other, and not both. This enables, on the one hand, the potential participation of a newly emerging political party that may be unable to meet criteria based on a historical record, and on the other the participation of a political party with a demonstrated historical record.

The specific criteria set by the Commission for the 2021 debates were seen by a few as too high a bar for debate participation, and by a larger group as too low a bar. However, many stakeholders expressed that the selected criteria were appropriate. The Commission concludes that, to the extent future participation criteria should allow for the participation of leaders of political parties that have the greatest likelihood of winning seats in the House of Commons, the 2021 criteria provide a useful reference and could be re-used in future elections.

In terms of applying the criteria and inviting leaders, the following components should be considered again in the future: the use of expert advice on the selection and averaging of public opinion polls, the use of as many polls as possible, and the articulation in advance of the election call of the requirements that must be met for a poll to be included in the Commission’s analysis.

It is important to ensure that the date upon which parties’ levels of national support are measured is as close to the date of the debates as possible. The 2021 criteria specified that this determination was to be made five days after the date the election was called; this meant the first debate took place 18 days after the Commission made its determination on parties’ levels of support. In the context of an electoral campaign, this can provide, in some elections, enough time for there to be a measurable change in a party’s level of support. The Commission recognizes that sufficient time between the final participation decision and the debate dates must be provided to ensure the debates producer can produce a high-quality debate, as required by the OIC, and that the political parties can properly prepare for the debates. However, a future Commission should continue discussions with both groups with the goal of narrowing this timeframe and making the final participation decision as close as possible to the debates.

Future participation criteria should aim to use the latest polls possible as a basis for determining levels of support, while still ensuring that a range of polling firms’ data are used and averaged. If timing permits, this could suggest the use of only those polls released after the election is called. Additionally, in order to provide the greatest degree of transparency and predictability possible, a future Commission

³⁴ <https://www.thewrit.ca/p/debate-criteria>

³⁵ https://www.peoplespartyofcanada.ca/leaders_debates_maxime_bernier_s_reaction

could explore the feasibility of not only identifying the criteria by which polls will be judged suitable for inclusion – which we did this time – but also of naming the specific polling firms that will be included.

Should a mandate be provided to consider organizing more debates, it is conceivable that a different set of guiding principles could be applied for these additional debates, such as considering: greatest likelihood of forming government instead of greatest likelihood of winning seats in Parliament. Further analysis would need to be done on the precise thresholds and methods that could be set to achieve this outcome, but a threshold of inviting leaders of those parties that have at least 20% national support in an aggregate of current public opinion polls could be a starting point to begin consultations. Any such criteria would need to be simple, clear, and objective.

REAFFIRMED RECOMMENDATION

Recommendation #4: Participation criteria should be as objective as possible and made public before the election campaign begins. The criteria should be set by the Debates Commissioner.

3.1.6 Measures to encourage participation

In 2021, as in 2019, all leaders invited to participate in the debates organized by the Commission were in attendance. While it is undeniable that there are always factors beyond a debate organizer's control with regards to leader participation, the Commission remains of the view that no special measures are needed on the part of Government to encourage leader participation.

The Commission remains of the view that the best ways to encourage participation are to:

- Deliver a large audience for the debates;
- Engage with leaders and political parties in advance of the election;
- Create a climate of expectancy and stability; and
- Make debate invitations and responses from parties publicly available.

REAFFIRMED RECOMMENDATION

Recommendation #5: Political parties should be encouraged rather than compelled to participate in leaders' debates.

3.1.7 Debates procurement

Background

In both 2019 and 2021, the debate producers were selected through a request for proposal (RFP). The purpose of the RFP was to contract the promotion, production and distribution of two debates for the next federal election, one in each official language. Contractors were welcome to bid on either the English-language debate, French-language debate, or both. The RFP was open to sole entities or to joint ventures, but organizations were encouraged to work together in an effort to ensure the debates reached as many Canadians as possible.

Once contracted, the Debate Broadcast Group (DBG) took full responsibility for the promotion, production, and distribution of debates while maintaining regular communications with the Commission.

The Commission approved the formats submitted and moderators proposed, but it was not involved in determining the themes or questions for the debates as these responsibilities were delegated to the DBG.

Should a future Commission undertake a greater role as it relates to the format and moderation, as suggested above, its approach to contracting should evolve slightly. Rather than defining its expectations in the RFP, a future Commission may want to evaluate bidders on experience and capability alone. A future Commission would in turn select an experienced and capable partner, with whom it would work collaboratively to develop the format while retaining final approval authority.

Future process

The DBG has indicated that the RFP process is onerous and that the bid should be simplified. They also suggested the RFP should be released as early as possible to give bidders more time to submit and to spread the workload out before the writ drop.

The group of media organizations that formed the debates producer in both 2019 and 2021 was able to reach an impressive number of Canadians. The direct link to these audiences is important and cannot be taken for granted. However, it is important to note the consortium approach is not without compromise.

Stakeholders suggested to the Commission that having only one broadcaster produce the debates may lead to better debates, as it would make workflow, choice of one single moderator and even production choices more streamlined. The Commission also learned through its consultations process that the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC)/Radio-Canada plays an integral role in debate production. A few stakeholders consulted went as far as to say that the public broadcaster may be the only broadcaster to have all the necessary in-house skills to bid successfully on the RFP as it is currently structured. This is worth noting as it may be relevant to future policy decisions.

In its post-debate consultations, the Commission examined and considered different types of procurement. As the last two RFPs netted similar results, an argument could be made for a directed contract (e.g. sole source). Some stakeholders consulted said they preferred this approach.

In considering the option of a directed contract, the Commission consulted with Public Service and Procurement Canada (PSPC). They suggested that a competitive process remains the best way for a future Commission to select a debates producer because it is fair, transparent and competitive.

The Commission agrees with the assessment that a competitive process remains the best way to select the debates producers. However, the RFP could be simplified to solve some of the problems encountered in the last two cycles.

The 2019 and 2021 RFP focused on specifics. It defined what the Commission expected from the debates producer and included detailed deliverables. When it came to the choice of moderator and format, for instance, the Commission was specific about its expectations.

In 2021, bidders were asked to submit a format and select a moderator who achieved the outlined objectives. By evaluating the bid with those specifics defined, the process gave the perception that the bid – and therefore the choice of moderator and the format – were “rubber stamped” by the

Commission. This did not allow for such important and creative choices to be fluid, dynamic and responsive to learning.

Instead of being prescriptive, a future RFP could focus on evaluating the experience and capabilities of bidders. It should clearly state a future Commission will work together with the debates producer on key decisions such as developing a format that better serves the public interest while retaining final approval. Those important decisions should not be part of the bid, but be made collectively, with the Commission having ultimate responsibility.

A future RFP should evaluate bidders' attributes, experience and *ability* to do what is required, rather than an actual proposal of what they are going to do. The RFP should specify those areas in which a future Commission will be involved (e.g., developing the format and selecting a moderator), and those areas in which it will not (e.g., choice of themes and questions).

Distribution remains an important part of the debates' success and an area where the DBG provided large in-kind contributions. As we will see in the next section on languages and accessibility, the ability of a debates producer to pull together diverse groups (e.g., APTN, OMNI, etc.) is a key factor in reaching audiences. Language distribution should continue to be a highly rated or even mandatory criterion in the RFP. The Commission should also ensure that it has the freedom to enter into multiple contracts. For instance, there could be an RFP for promotion, production and distribution and *separate* contracts for distribution for specific languages or formats.

Like distribution, debate promotion remains an important part of the debates' success and an area where the DBG provided large in-kind contributions. Promotion should continue to be a mandatory component of the RFP and should be weighted heavily in the evaluation criteria.

REAFFIRMED RECOMMENDATION

Recommendation #6: A competitive process should continue to be used to select the debates producer.

3.1.8 Media accreditation

In 2021 as in 2019, the Commission was responsible for the accreditation of journalists to the debates. This accreditation provided access to the press room, where journalists could watch the debates, and to the press conference room, where they could interview the leaders after the debates. Since these press conferences were broadcast live on a number of television networks, the Commission considered them as part of the overall broadcast environment of the debates, in respect of which high journalistic standards must apply.

The following excerpt of our media accreditation policy, published in August 2021, explains the Commission's reasoning:

"In order to protect the integrity of the debates, the principles of high journalistic standards and journalist independence must extend to the press availabilities of the leaders held immediately after the debates when each leader takes questions from journalists. These press availabilities are broadcast live to millions of viewers and, as such, are a natural extension of the debates and

an integral part of the press coverage of the events. Consequently, the Commission believes it is reasonable to expect that the journalists accredited to the debates and the press availabilities, both in a physical or virtual environment, adhere to the standards of professional journalism.”

The Commission considers the debates as rare, privileged moments of a campaign where voters can hear from political leaders in real time and in an unmediated, unfiltered, and undistorted way. To achieve this, the debate environment must be free of disinformation and other forms of manipulation.

The Commission recognized that it doesn't have the authority to decide by itself whether journalists adhere to the ethical standards of their profession. Consequently, it relied on the codes of ethics of five professional journalistic organizations for its accreditation process: the Canadian Association of Journalists, the News Media Council, the Parliamentary Press Gallery, the Québec Federation of Journalists and the Québec Press Council. These organizations cover the vast majority of journalists involved in coverage of federal election campaigns. Members of these organizations were automatically given accreditation to the debates.

In order not to penalize journalists who do not belong to these organizations, the Commissions made provisions for accreditation applications from other journalists, including from other countries. Applicants had to provide examples of their work to ascertain that they are professional journalists. The Commission would then evaluate their work to determine whether it was free of conflict of interest. It relied for this on the guidelines of the Canadian Association of Journalists.

According to the CAJ, there is a conflict of interest:

- when an organization:
 - becomes an actor in the stories it tells, including providing and applying financial and legal assistance to some of its sources to work toward a desired outcome or offering free legal services, crowdfunds to help some individuals in stories hire lawyers, purchases political advertising and launches petitions,³⁶Or
- when a reporter:
 - writes opinion pieces about subjects they also cover as journalists, endorses political candidates or causes, takes part in demonstrations, signs petitions, does public relations work, fundraises and makes financial contributions.³⁷

The Commission opened the accreditation process the day after the writ drop. Journalists had 10 days to apply. In addition, in advance of the debates, the Commission's COVID-19 protocol with respect to attending the debates in person was publicly available.

The Commission received 110 applications for the French language debate and 116 applications for the English language debate. Of these applications, the Commission denied a total of 16 applications that sought accreditation for both debates.

³⁶ https://caj.ca/blog/Alberta_Press_Gallery_has_a_duty_and_a_right_to_determine_access

³⁷ <https://caj.ca/ethics-guidelines>

In particular, the Commission rejected the applications of representatives of one organization, Rebel News Network (“Rebel”). The Commission determined that the Rebel website violated the articles of conflict of interest of the Canadian Association of Journalists. The Commission found that Rebel was in a conflict of interest because it becomes an active participant in stories it covers by launching petitions, fundraising and engaging in litigation on issues that it reports on regularly. Rebel also embeds links to its petitions and fundraising campaigns within its articles and videos.

Rebel applied for and obtained an emergency injunction from the Federal Court that obligated the Commission to accredit its members to the debates. The Federal Court ruled that Rebel had “satisfied the test for an interlocutory mandatory injunction.” Reasons from the Federal Court are pending.

The Commission also rejected the accreditation of representatives of Rebel News Network in 2019 because it considered that Rebel News Network and another applicant, True North, were involved in advocacy. Rebel and True North obtained an emergency injunction, which required the Commission to approve their accreditation requests. In that case, the Federal Court ruled that denying the applicants accreditation would cause irreparable harm to their ability to cover the debates. After the 2019 debates, Rebel sought to continue with its application for judicial review. The Commission in response brought a motion to strike the application on the ground of mootness, which the Federal Court granted. Rebel then appealed the mootness motion decision to the Federal Court of Appeal. At present, Rebel is in the process of discontinuing its appeal.

In the absence of a ruling on whether it has the authority to determine criteria for media accreditation and the manner to do so, the Commission now finds itself confronted with a judicial void. The first ruling, in 2019, faulted the Commission on its procedural mechanisms. The Commission believed it had adequately addressed this issue in the 2021 debates by, among others, publishing in advance criteria against which applications would be evaluated. However, the court again granted an injunction forcing the Commission to accredit media entities that the Commission views to be in a conflict of interest. At the writing of this report, the Federal Court’s reasons for the 2021 injunction proceeding are still not known. Accordingly, the Commission has limited guidance on whether it has properly addressed the question of due process. Whether the media accreditation process violates expressive freedoms remains an open question. In its decisions on individual applicants, the Commission found that the impact on an applicant’s freedom of expression was outweighed by the salutary effect of the Commission carrying out its mandate or upholding high journalistic standards.

The Commission continues to view its media accreditation policy as reasonable and an appropriate exercise of its delegated authority. It is the Commission’s duty to provide for Canadians a debate environment free from disinformation, manipulation, or conflicts of interest as prohibited by the relevant professional journalist associations.

Regardless, the Commission faces a dilemma: to continue to be responsible for media accreditation at the risk of being overturned by the courts, or approve all accreditation requests regardless of the applicants’ qualifications as professional journalists. This would mean that anybody who claims to be a journalist could be accredited to the debates, regardless of any qualification or a reasonable vetting process.

In the absence of a ruling on its authority over the media accreditation process (including the “scrum” after the debates) and the applicable criteria thereto, the Commission is not in a position to make a recommendation at this time. We have outlined above an issue that will have to be resolved before the

next debates. Whether this authority to accredit media properly should rest with the Commission is yet to be determined.

3.1.9 Languages & accessibility

The Commission’s OICs state:

“It is desirable that leaders’ debates reach all Canadians, including those with disabilities, those living in remote areas and those living in official language minority communities”³⁸ and that the Commission should “endeavour to ensure that the leaders’ debates are available in languages other than French and English, and, in doing so, pay special attention to Canada’s Indigenous languages.”³⁹

For the leaders’ debates to be a democratic exercise, citizens must be able to access and experience the debates in an accessible way. To reach as many Canadians as possible, the Commission must ensure the debates’ signal reaches as many Canadian households as possible; that Canadians are able to watch, listen or read the debates in a language and format that is accessible to them; and that the debates allow them to engage in a way that makes them feel that the debates are *for them*.

In 2021, both debates were translated into French and English as well as into 14 other languages, including six Indigenous languages, ASL and LSQ. They were also available in closed captioning⁴⁰ and described video.

Language viewership

	September 8 French debate TV	September 8 French debate digital	September 9 English debate TV	September 9 English debate digital	TOTAL
ASL	Not offered	1,364	Not offered	26,841	28,205
LSQ	Not offered	7,022	Not offered	561	7,583
Described Video	23,000	437	14,000	4767	42,204
Arabic	Data N.A.	476	Data N.A.	349	Data N.A.
Cantonese	15,000	761	2,000	938	18,699
Denesuline	Not offered	Not offered	Not offered	1,141	1,141
East Cree	Not offered	Not offered	Not offered	508	508
Innu	16,000	471	Not offered	Not offered	16,471
Inuktitut	Not offered	Not offered	Not offered	546	546
Italian	7,000	406	11,000	163	18,569
Mandarin	3,000	707	21,000	1,271	25,978
Ojibway	5,000	839	Not offered	Not offered	5,839
Plains Cree	Not offered	Not offered	1,000	1,104	2,104
Punjabi	4,000	1,737	27,000	1,729	34,466
Tagalog	15,000	3,723	35,000	1,344	55,067

³⁸ <https://orders-in-council.canada.ca/attachment.php?attach=38858&lang=en>

³⁹ <https://orders-in-council.canada.ca/attachment.php?attach=39876&lang=en>

⁴⁰ Closed captioning was embedded on the broadcast signal, so anyone watching had the option of watching with captions.

In 2019 and 2021, language interpretation was included in the request for proposal (RFP), making it the responsibility of the debates producer. In 2021, the Debate Broadcast Group (DBG) included the addition of the Aboriginal Peoples Television Network (APTN) as part of the partnership, and OMNI as a distribution partner. These networks were key to the success of language interpretation and distribution. A future Commission should work with the debates producer and stakeholders to explore a way to offer ASL and LSQ on television, in addition to making it available digitally.

To best serve non-official language communities, a future Commission should develop relationships and contracts with broadcasters and partners who have strong existing relationships with these communities. A future RFP could evaluate bidders not only on their ability and commitment to provide interpretation and translation, but also on whether they can guarantee distribution and promotion to those important communities. As noted above, a future Commission should maintain the freedom to have *additional* contracts with distributors and organizations to ensure the feed of these languages finds the right audience.

Following the 2021 election, the debates producers told the Commission that translation was one of the most onerous parts of the debate production. The DGB worked directly with the Translation Bureau, and both parties said the relationship was positive and productive. Translation represents about 25% of the production budget. The Bureau said there would be no cost efficiency to removing the translation from the RFP (and having it rest with a future Commission). However, the Commission heard from the Translation Bureau and the debates producer that language interpretation is an area that would benefit from a longer runway.

In post-debate consultations, the Translation Bureau talked of the benefit of having contact between election cycles. This would allow policy development for the choice of Indigenous languages, and for the Bureau to work with Indigenous language and ASL and LSQ interpreters to get them “debate ready” before the debate. It would also provide the ability to test production decisions related to interpretation, and to develop an outreach campaign for the specific Indigenous language communities. This would lead to better representation of Indigenous languages because the languages would be chosen based on population and communities served, rather than on availability of qualified interpreters.

The Translation Bureau indicated that for many of the simultaneous translators, interpreting a debate is “the greatest event of their career.” Having a relationship between election cycles would allow amplification of this investment by connecting interpreters with other departments in government while they are in the national capital region for the debates, and to work with the interpreters to develop outreach campaigns.

In consultations with the Department of Canadian Heritage, the Commission learned that the *Indigenous Languages Act* (ILA) is in the early days of operationalization, working to create a policy on Indigenous language translation and interpretation. The government department says it considers the debates to be one of the most high-profile initiatives in the space, noting that a future Commission would be able to share findings from its experience.

REAFFIRMED RECOMMENDATION

Recommendation #7: Debates should continue to be available in French, English and other languages, paying special attention to Canada’s Indigenous languages.

3.2 Improving a future Debates Commission

3.2.1 Debates promotion and citizen engagement

In 2019, the Commission tested three different outreach and promotional models and learned that the most effective and cost-efficient way to promote debates was to incorporate promotion into the request for proposal (RFP) for the debates producer.

In 2021, promotion for the debates – how, where, when, why to watch – was part of the debates producer’s scope of work. The DBG promoted the debates on all channels and platforms.

The promotional strategy for the debates was also directly linked with production and distribution. As a result, debate promotion focused on infiltration through distribution, and promotion of that infiltration. As noted, the debates aired live on 36 television networks, four radio networks, and more than 115 digital streams. This level of distribution is advantageous because it reaches people who do not typically engage in politics. Like the Super Bowl, or the Oscars, even people who did not watch the debates were aware that they were happening or had happened. This is important because research shows that people who watched even just *part* of the debates experienced an increased ability to rate party leaders, and an increased election interest and increased interest in politics more generally.⁴¹

With promotion firmly in the hands of the debates producer, the intention was to focus outreach efforts on stakeholder engagement with specific communities. The strategy was to develop an outreach campaign to promote Indigenous languages, accessible formats, and non-official languages.

However, with the snap election call coming shortly after the Commission restarted its operations, we had to focus on the main priority of debate production, and there was insufficient time to enter into outreach contracts. Previous sections on reach, languages and accessibility have outlined the Commission’s suggestions for how to move forward in this area.

In the future, there should be a focus on ensuring distribution partners for Indigenous languages, ASL, LSQ and non-official languages to maximize reach in these communities. Work can be done “off cycle” to develop relationships with organizations who are leaders in specific communities: Canadians living with disabilities, ethno-cultural groups (to promote various language offerings), Indigenous groups (to promote Indigenous language feeds) and youth (to promote and create political awareness in the next generation). A focus in these areas aligns with CES findings that more work could be undertaken to build awareness of debates in future federal elections.⁴²

This “off cycle” work is particularly important in a minority government context as it would effectively allow a future Commission to be ready to “press play” in a snap election. It is unlikely that an entity that is recreated less than one year before an election will have the time to develop contacts, relationships and resources or outreach contracts with organizations for outreach purposes.

⁴¹ CES section 4.6.2

⁴² CES section 4.1.1

Minority government context and off-cycle considerations

In post-debate consultations, the Commission repeatedly heard that there is work to be done between elections. Whoever is entrusted with the public trust of debates needs to maintain some permanent capacity between elections to ensure it can organize debates in minority government situations, maintain relationships with interested parties between elections and foster discussion about best practices in debate formats and production, both in Canada and in other countries.

The DBG said the request for proposal and contract should be released and awarded as early as possible. This would allow the debates producer to secure the venue, hire interpreters, begin production design and work with the entity to set the debate dates.

In 2019 and 2021, the Commission received advice and guidance from the Canadian Cyber Centre at the Communications Security Establishment (CSE), an organization with a mandate to examine threats to the democratic process. In its publication, “Cyber threats to Canada’s democratic process: July 2021 update,”⁴³ the CSE outlines that democratic processes remain a popular target for threats. Election Canada’s Public Opinion Research Study on Electoral Matters⁴⁴ found that that 78% of respondents saw “false information online” as one of the factors that could have the most impact on the 2021 election.

CSE noted that it would like to offer more services to protect the debates and get involved earlier in the process – at least 12 months before the debates – to ensure that the advice they provide is actionable. It also recommended that the selection of the debate dates and location be made as early as possible, and possibly be separated or removed from the debates producer RFP. This would allow “off cycle” work between CSE and the venue to occur separately from the procurement process.

CSE also proposed an ongoing relationship with the debate venue. This, they contend, would allow cyber security to be considered in all areas of the debate organization – such as IT infrastructure at the debate venue – and not only with the television broadcast of the debate.

While the Commission has taken action to try to combat disinformation in both 2019 and 2021 (hosting and promoting verified debate video on its website, working with CSE to ensure the debate broadcast feed is protected, etc.), there is more that could be done in this space to strengthen the cybersecurity of the debate venue and broadcast feeds and to ensure the digital spaces broadcasting the debate are safe spaces, free of disinformation. Some social media platforms do not allow broadcasters to limit comments from the public. There was concern that the comments on debate digital pages could spread misinformation. A future Commission could work with digital and social media platforms to combat misinformation and create a safe space to host the debates digitally.

As noted above, the Translation Bureau had similar feedback for the Commission. The Bureau suggested an operational existence between cycles to better serve Indigenous language communities. They also put forward a request that debate dates and location be set as early as possible. In a majority government context, they advocated for fixed debate dates.

Off-cycle work through the establishment of a permanent capacity between election cycles could include:

⁴³ <https://cyber.gc.ca/en/cyber-threats-canadas-democratic-process-july-2021-update>

⁴⁴ <https://www.elections.ca/content.aspx?section=res&dir=rec/reg/porsem&document=p1&lang=e>

- Working with the Department of Canadian Heritage and Statistics Canada on a population-based policy for Indigenous interpretation;
- Working with the Translation Bureau to select and train interpreters for debates;
- Working with Indigenous leaders and communities to promote Indigenous language offerings;
- Selecting the debate venue;
- Consulting with the Canadian Cyber Centre to ensure cyber security of the debate venue and debate feed;
- Working with stakeholders to ensure debate integrity and combat disinformation around debates;
- Consulting with debate organizers internationally on best practices on format and moderating;
- Testing debate formats;
- Selecting and developing potential moderators;
- Providing advice and guidance to other debate organizers;
- Cultivating stakeholder relationships; and/or
- Developing outreach contracts to ensure all Canadians – even those especially underserved – engage with leaders’ debates.

NEW RECOMMENDATION

Recommendation #8: The Commission should maintain sufficient permanent capacity between elections to ensure it can organize debates at short notice and to cultivate relationships between elections to foster discussion, both in Canada and in other countries.

3.2.2 Summary of expenditures

The Commission received a budget of \$5.5 million from the Government for each of the 2019 and 2021 election cycles. In 2019, of this amount, it spent approximately \$3.9 million, and in 2021, \$3.5 million. Categories of expenditures and comparisons to the 2019 cycle are as follows:

Leaders’ Debates Commission – Estimated Summary of Expenditures

	First mandate (2019 debates)	Second mandate (2021 debates)
Activity	Actual * (\$ millions)	Preliminary estimate ** (\$ millions)
Research, evaluation and outreach initiatives	0.3	0.1
Professional services	0.5	0.5
Contract for incremental costs for debate production	1.7	1.7
Commission salaries and administrative expenses	1.1	0.8
Privy Council Office administrative expenses	0.3	0.5
TOTAL	3.9	3.5

* Actuals are the authorities used in the current fiscal year published in the public accounts of 2018-2019 and 2019-2020.

** Preliminary estimates are the authorities used in the current fiscal year published in the public accounts of 2020-2021, and an estimate for 2021-2022. Figures may not add up to totals due to rounding.

In 2021, research, evaluation, and outreach initiatives included research undertaken by the Canadian Election Study (CES) consortium. There were no expenditures on outreach initiatives, which is a departure from 2019.

Professional services included legal services, website coding, report editing and layout.

Contract for incremental costs for debate production included funding for services that are above and beyond the historical expectations of a debates producer (e.g.: the obligation to distribute the signal freely, alternative formats for accessibility, language interpretation). The DBG absorbed costs that – historically – have been incurred by debates producers (e.g. staffing, promotion, remotes, connectivity, and technical distribution).

Commission salaries and administrative expenses included those expenses related primarily to employee services (one full-time and four part-time staff, including the Debates Commissioner) and support to the seven-person Advisory Board.

Privy Council administrative expenses included the provision of back-office support in relation to procurement, finance, information technology, personnel, and accommodations.

As in 2019, the Commission benefitted from significant in-kind contributions from the debates producer and partner organizations. These additional contributions, valued at approximately \$3 million, also involved extensive debate promotion by the DBG.

3.2.3 Future mandate, authorities and governance

The Commission has now been responsible for the organization of leaders' debates in the last two federal election campaigns: 2019 and 2021. After the 2019 experience, the Commission recommended to the Government that it eventually be made permanent through legislation.

In 2020, while being clear that the Government hadn't made a decision on this recommendation, the President of the Queen's Privy Council and Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs did note in response to the 2019 report that he would "favour an ongoing permanent structure in legislation, which would provide that basic platform in general elections of an accessible, open and fair debate between leaders with a properly independent commission to make those decisions."⁴⁵

More recently, the Prime Minister's December 2021 mandate letter to the Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs, Infrastructure and Communities asked the Minister to "consider the forthcoming report of Canada's Leaders' Debates Commissioner on how to improve leaders' debates and take steps to ensure that they better serve the public interest."⁴⁶

⁴⁵ <https://www.ourcommons.ca/DocumentViewer/en/43-2/PROC/meeting-10/evidence>

⁴⁶ <https://pm.gc.ca/en/mandate-letters/2021/12/16/minister-intergovernmental-affairs-infrastructure-and-communities>

In considering the future of debate organization in Canada, the Commission has begun its work from a first principle: leaders' debates are critical elements of an election. Their stability and predictability are therefore important to a healthy democracy.

Reviewing its 2021 experience, the Commission believes it has made a meaningful contribution to this first principle in the following ways:

Increased viewership

In 2019, the Commission debates registered a record viewership of 19 million for both debates. In 2021, viewership stood at 14 million and was therefore still high compared to previous debates and other "event television" in 2021.

Wider reach and accessibility

Making the debate signal free for distribution enabled multiple partners to distribute the debates and increased reach considerably. The English-language and French-language debates were available live on 36 television networks, four radio networks, and more than 115 digital streams.

The debates were also available in 16 other languages, including six Indigenous languages, ASL and LSQ. They were available in closed captioning and described video as well. This fostered engagement in communities that are often on the margins of political involvement.

The 2019 formation of a wider media coalition to produce the debates resulted in greater buy-in from the media in the debates. The debates became the most prominent campaign event again in 2021, as they had been in 2019, as evidenced by both the viewership figures above and social media analysis.⁴⁷

The Commission's production budget allowed the media consortium to produce high-quality debates, event television which increased their impact. By comparison, almost twice as many Canadians watched the debates in 2021 as watched the Super Bowl.

Depoliticization and predictability

The creation of the Commission provided greater stability to the debates. For the first time, political parties agreed to participate without any pre-conditions.

Transparency

The Commission established clear and transparent rules for the debates. This included the establishment of participation criteria that were developed following wide consultations. They were also communicated widely before the election call. The greater level of transparency provided better conditions for trust in the debates.

Knowledge base

The Commission's research, consultation process and analysis following each political cycle are creating a knowledge base about debates that would not exist otherwise. Commission staff are regularly invited to symposiums outside Canada to share their experience and data. The studies and polling commissioned are breaking new ground about best practices in debates and about what voters expect and get out of debates. This objective data guides the improvement of debates with every cycle.

⁴⁷ CES section 4.4

The future

In light of the LDC's 2021 stakeholder feedback, it is necessary to think clearly about four potential options for the future of debate organization:

1. The discontinuation of the Leaders' Debates Commission;
2. The continuation of the Commission as is: current mandate and operating approach (status quo);
3. Incremental change to the Commission's current mandate and operating approach; and
4. The establishment of a 'full service' Commission responsible for 'in-house' debate production.

The Commission has reflected on whether Option 1 should be considered but does not believe that leaders' debates are sufficiently stable, predictable and effective to warrant the discontinuation of a publicly supported debate entity. Moreover, we believe that a future entity can continue to serve the public interest by ensuring the broadest possible viewership and accessibility of debates, by setting high standards of transparency, cost-effectiveness and relevance, and by doing its part to help build a strong community of expertise across the country. It will be important to ensure that a future entity be subject to regular review, with institutional options to be considered as part of the process.

It is clear that a continuation of the status quo under Option 2 is not optimal given the above assessment of the 2021 debates and the recommendations related to the role of a Commission.

The establishment of a "full service" Commission or mandating a future Commission to produce debates in-house, as noted under Option 4, would necessitate the onboarding of significant talent and expertise, and would be expected to result in higher costs for debate production versus a contractual relationship with an existing entity. Such an approach may also risk a Commission's relationship with media organizations, who are key stakeholders and who indicated a willingness to work with the Commission in 2019 and 2021.

The Commission believes that Option 3 is therefore appropriate to ensure the delivery of debates in the public interest, as it has concluded that there is need for a greater role for itself in debate format and moderation. In other words, what is needed is modest, incremental change to the Commission's existing mandate and operational approach. These incremental changes are based on the findings and recommendations outlined throughout the report. Much of this incremental change can be accomplished with existing authorities, but more explicit responsibility in the Commission's enabling instrument to have final approval for setting debate format and moderation may be warranted. The Commission would also require a clear mandate and more funding should the recommendation to have the ability and authority to consider organizing additional leaders' debates where feasible be endorsed.

Two comments received from the public aptly sum up the task for a future Commission:

"The work the Debate Commission does is important, but there is work to be done to ensure that the work they do is not done in vain."

"En tant qu'organisme responsable de l'organisation du débat des chefs, vous êtes tenus de vous assurer que le débat soit présenté dans un cadre neutre et impartial, afin que les citoyens puissent faire un choix éclairé par rapport au candidat ou parti qui représente le mieux ses valeurs."

The Commission has concluded that there are certain attributes that are key contributors to the successful organization of debates by a future entity. These are:

- Independence: apolitical and non-partisan, independent and perceived to be independent from the government of the day;
- Legitimacy: viewed as unimpeachably operating in the public interest and broadly accepted by political parties;
- Transparency: providing clear reasons for its decisions and opportunities for public input;
- Accountability: efficient measurement and full reporting on its actions and its costs;
- Stability: funding and mandate certainty;
- Flexibility: in purchasing and in both minority and majority contexts;
- Expertise: delivery of informative, effective, and compelling debates, learning from past experience and international best practices; and
- Permanence: operation across multiple electoral cycles.

Authorities

The Commission recognizes there are likely a number of institutional models that could be considered to deliver debates in the public interest, in consideration of these key attributes. We would encourage the Government to explore a number of options in this regard, including:

1. The merits of stand-alone legislation or amendments to existing legislation, or both;
2. The merits of an independent public commission model or ongoing support for an independent non-governmental entity;
3. Determining whether other entities (e.g., CRTC, Elections Canada, or CBC/Radio-Canada) have specific roles to play;
4. Considering a periodic review process, such as every five years, to assess whether and how the independent entity is delivering on its mandate and what, if any, changes may be warranted.

We are increasingly concerned about what we consider to be a growing gap between network television imperatives and what the public expects of debates. We believe that, as the custodian of the public trust, and as an entity mandated to protect the public interest in these debates, the Commission has a duty to be involved in determining what format and moderation attributes best address the democratic needs of the public. We also believe that the Commission can play a role in these issues without jeopardizing the editorial independence of the individuals who moderate the debates and ask questions of the leaders. Finally, we believe this can best be achieved through meaningful dialogue between elections.

The Commission provides a service to Canadians. In the future, it needs to continue doing so on an independent basis and with broad political legitimacy. The Commission was well served by its mandate and could continue to be served by a similar instrument, subject to the Government's consideration of our earlier recommendations. Nevertheless, the Commission reiterates its recommendation from 2019 that, ultimately, there should be an opportunity for Parliament to contribute to the mandate of a future entity with periodic review. Legislation is viewed as one of the preferred means of achieving this outcome.

Governance

Debates Commissioner

In both 2019 and 2021, the Leaders' Debates Commission was headed by a Debates Commissioner who was a part-time OIC appointee. The Government announced the reappointment of the Commissioner in November 2020.⁴⁸

We believe that it continues to be appropriate to have a future Commission headed by a single Commissioner because it provides for effective organizational direction setting. Post-debate consultations and the Commission's findings have revealed that there is an important skillset for an effective Debates Commissioner, owing primarily to the fact that their decisions must be unimpeachably viewed as being taken in the public interest. A Debates Commissioner must fulfill the functions of the position in a manner that is neutral, fair, and principled. Desired qualities include a degree of respect or name recognition such that they are seen across the political spectrum and more generally in the Canadian population as impartial. A secondary skillset to seek would include experience in broadcasting or journalism, experience in debate negotiations, and experience building relationships amongst political parties.

The appointment of the Debates Commissioner should be validated through consultation with opposition parties. This gives the Commission non-partisan objectivity, visibility, and profile, as well as credibility for decisions on things such as the participation criteria. Language detailing the process and manner by which these consultations will be undertaken should be considered for addition to a Commission's potential future enabling instrument.

REAFFIRMED RECOMMENDATIONS:

Recommendation #9: The Commission reaffirms it should be headed by a Debates Commissioner, whose appointment process involves consultation with the registered political parties represented in the House of Commons.

Recommendation #10: The Commission reaffirms it should ultimately be established through legislation (or similar mechanism) with a periodic review process, such as every five years, in order to prioritize greater continuity, transparency, and access to resources. Its institutional makeup should prioritize real and perceived operational independence, cost effectiveness, and administrative agility.

PRINCIPAL RECOMMENDATION: We recommend the continuation and improvement of a permanent publicly funded entity to organize leaders' debates that is subject to periodic review.

⁴⁸ <https://www.canada.ca/en/democratic-institutions/news/2020/09/reappointment-of-the-leaders-debates-commissioner.html>

Advisory Board

As in 2019, the Commission's Advisory Board provided an essential service to the 2021 Leaders' Debates Commission. The diversity of viewpoints and the inclusion of both political and media experience, as well as a mature and objective judgement and keen interest in trust in public institutions, were instrumental and especially valuable to the Commission carrying out its mandate.

We conclude that a future Commission should continue to seek and rely upon counsel from an Advisory Board that brings a range of perspectives and skills. Should a future Commission exercise a greater role in determining debate format and selecting debate moderators, expertise in these areas would be an important component of a future Advisory Board.

Conclusion

Debates play an essential role in the health of Canada's democracy. Millions of Canadians watch debates in every election, testament to their importance. In this report, we propose ways to make them even more meaningful to Canadian voters as they evaluate and choose leaders to represent them in Parliament.

We wish to thank our advisory board as well as our 2021 partners in the Debates Production Group for their commitment to the leaders' debates. We also thank academics at the University of Toronto and other Canadian universities for their research and expertise. To the more than 40 stakeholders, both here and abroad, and to the more than 1,100 Canadians who were generous with their thoughts on how to improve debates, we extend our gratitude.

Our ongoing challenge is to ensure that debates not only reach people but strengthen their trust in public institutions and the political process. This is especially important in an era where disinformation and distrust threaten to undermine the foundations of democracy. To achieve this, the Commission and its partners must endeavour to produce debates that represent the public interest. We hope that the proposals we make in this report will contribute to an environment that fosters thoughtful debate and civil discourse on the issues that determine the future course of the country.

RECOMMENDATIONS

These recommendations seek to improve the mandate, role and structure of the Commission or an independent body. For the purpose of readability, we use the term Commission.

PRINCIPAL RECOMMENDATION: We recommend the continuation and improvement of a permanent publicly funded entity to organize leaders’ debates that is subject to periodic review.

NEW RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation #1: The Commission should have final approval over the format and should work with stakeholders between elections to develop a simplified format that best serves Canadians.

Recommendation #2: The Commission should select the debate moderator(s) based on expert consultations.

Recommendation #3: The Commission should organize two publicly funded leaders’ debates (one in each official language) and have the ability, funding and authority to consider organizing additional leaders’ debates where feasible. It should also have the ability to provide advice and expertise to other debate organizers.

Recommendation #8: The Commission should maintain sufficient permanent capacity between elections to ensure it can organize debates at short notice and to cultivate relationships between elections to foster discussion, both in Canada and in other countries.

REAFFIRMED RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation #4: Participation criteria should be as objective as possible and made public before the election campaign begins. The criteria should be set by the Debates Commissioner.

Recommendation #5: Political parties should be encouraged rather than compelled to participate in leaders’ debates.

Recommendation #6: A competitive process should continue to be used to select the debates producer.

Recommendation #7: Debates should continue to be available in French, English and other languages, paying special attention to Canada’s Indigenous languages.

Recommendation #9: The Commission reaffirms it should be headed by a Debates Commissioner, whose appointment process involves consultation with the registered political parties represented in the House of Commons.

Recommendation #10: The Commission reaffirms it should ultimately be established through legislation (or similar mechanism) with a periodic review process, such as every five years, in order to prioritize greater continuity, transparency, and access to resources. Its institutional makeup should prioritize real and perceived operational independence, cost effectiveness, and administrative agility.

Appendices

Appendix 1 – Leaders’ Debates Commission – Orders in Council



Government
of Canada

Gouvernement
du Canada

PC Number: 2018-1322

Date: 2018-10-29

Whereas leaders’ debates are an essential contribution to the health of Canadian democracy and are in the public interest;

Whereas it is desirable that leaders’ debates reach all Canadians, including those with disabilities, those living in remote areas and those living in official language minority communities;

Whereas it is desirable that leaders’ debates be effective, informative and compelling and benefit from the participation of the leaders who have the greatest likelihood of becoming Prime Minister or whose political parties have the greatest likelihood of winning seats in Parliament;

Whereas it is desirable that leaders’ debates be organized using clear, open and transparent participation criteria;

Whereas it is desirable that there be a commissioner who is responsible for the organization of leaders’ debates;

Whereas it is desirable that the commissioner responsible for leaders’ debates have the benefit of the advice of an advisory board;

And whereas it is in the public interest that the Leaders’ Debates Commission be established without delay;

Therefore, Her Excellency the Governor General in Council, on the recommendation of the Prime Minister, establishes the Leaders’ Debates Commission, in accordance with the annexed schedule.

Attendu que les débats des chefs contribuent de façon essentielle à la santé de la démocratie canadienne et qu'ils sont dans l'intérêt public;

Attendu qu'il est souhaitable que les débats des chefs rejoignent tous les Canadiens, y compris ceux qui vivent avec un handicap, ceux qui vivent dans des régions éloignées et ceux qui font partie de communautés de langue officielle en situation minoritaire;

Attendu qu'il est souhaitable que les débats des chefs soient efficaces et informatifs, qu'ils suscitent l'intérêt et qu'ils profitent de la participation des chefs qui sont les plus à même de devenir premier ministre ou dont le parti politique est le plus à même de remporter des sièges au Parlement;

Attendu qu'il est souhaitable que les débats des chefs soient organisés selon des critères de participation clairs, ouverts et transparents;

Attendu qu'il est souhaitable qu'un commissaire soit chargé de l'organisation des débats des chefs;

Attendu qu'il est souhaitable que le commissaire chargé des débats des chefs bénéficie des conseils d'un comité consultatif;

Attendu qu'il est dans l'intérêt public que la Commission des débats des chefs soit créée sans délai,

À ces causes, sur recommandation du premier ministre, Son Excellence la Gouverneure générale en conseil crée la Commission des débats des chefs, conformément à l'annexe ci-jointe.

SCHEDULE

LEADERS' DEBATES COMMISSION

Commission

1 There is established a commission, to be known as the Leaders' Debates Commission, consisting of the Debates Commissioner, the Advisory Board and the Secretariat.

2 The mandate of the Leaders' Debates

Commission is to

- (a)** organize one leaders' debate in each official language during each general election period;
- (b)** ensure that the leader of each political party that meets two of the following criteria is invited to participate in the leaders' debates:
 - (i)** at the time the general election in question is called, the party is represented in the House of Commons by a Member of Parliament who was elected as a member of that party,
 - (ii)** the Debates Commissioner considers that the party intends to endorse candidates in at least 90% of electoral districts in the general election in question,
 - (iii)** the party's candidates for the most recent general election received at that election at least 4% of the number of valid votes cast or, based on the recent political context, public opinion polls and previous general election results, the Debates Commissioner considers that candidates endorsed by the party have a legitimate chance to be elected in the general election in question;
- (c)** ensure that the leaders' debates are broadcast and otherwise made available in an accessible way to persons with disabilities;
- (d)** ensure that the leaders' debates reach as many Canadians as possible, including those living in remote areas and those living in official language minority communities, through a variety of media and other fora;
- (e)** ensure that the leaders' debates are broadcast free of charge, whether or not the broadcast is live;
- (f)** ensure that any reproduction of the leaders' debates is subject to only the terms and conditions that are necessary to preserve the integrity of the debates;
- (g)** ensure that high journalistic standards are maintained for the leaders' debates;
- (h)** undertake an awareness raising campaign and outreach activities to ensure that Canadians know when, where and how to access the leaders' debates; and
- (i)** provide advice and support in respect of other political debates related to the general election, including candidates' debates, as the Debates Commissioner considers appropriate.

3 The Leaders' Debates

Commission is to

- (a)** conduct any necessary research or rely on any applicable research to ensure that the leaders' debates are of high quality;
- (b)** develop and manage constructive relationships with key opinion leaders and stakeholders;
- (c)** conduct its activities in a manner that does not preclude other organizations from producing or organizing leaders' debates or other political debates;
- (d)** ensure that the decisions regarding the organization of the leaders' debates, including those respecting participation criteria, are made publicly available in a timely manner;
- (e)** ensure that the leaders' responses to the invitations to participate in the leaders' debates are made publicly available before and during the debates; and
- (f)** conduct an evidence-based assessment of the leaders' debates that it has organized, including with respect to the number of persons to whom the debates were accessible, the number of persons who actually accessed them and the knowledge of Canadians of political parties, their leaders and their positions.

4 In fulfilling its mandate, the Leaders' Debates Commission is to be guided by the pursuit of the public interest and by the principles of independence, impartiality, credibility, democratic citizenship, civic education, inclusion and cost-effectiveness.

5 (1) The Leaders' Debates Commission is an agent of Her Majesty and, in that capacity, may enter into contracts or agreements with third parties in fulfilling its mandate.

(2) The Leaders' Debates Commission is to ensure that calls for proposals regarding the production of the leaders' debates identify clear criteria by which proposals will be evaluated, including the presentation of strategies to

- (a)** maximize the reach of the leaders' debates and engagement with Canadians, including those who may face barriers to voting;
- (b)** create momentum for and awareness of the leaders' debates before the debates take place and to sustain engagement of Canadians after the debates take place;
- (c)** make the leaders' debates more accessible to Canadians with disabilities, those living in remote areas and those living in official language minority communities; and

(d) ensure that the leaders’ debates are reflective of high production and journalistic standards, while ensuring brand neutrality.

Debates Commissioner

6 (1) The Debates Commissioner is the director of the Leaders’ Debates Commission and, in that capacity, conducts the ordinary business of the Commission and is responsible for the appointment of the members of the Secretariat.

(2) The Debates Commissioner is appointed to hold office during good behaviour, on a part-time basis, subject to removal for cause.

(3) The Debates Commissioner is to consider and apply as far as possible the advice provided by the Advisory Board, to ensure that the organization of the leaders’ debates benefits from the expertise and experience of the members of the Advisory Board and that the leaders’ debates reflect the public interest.

Advisory Board

7 The mandate of the Advisory Board is to advise the Debates Commissioner to allow the Debates Commissioner to fulfil his or her mandate.

8 (1) The members of the Advisory Board are appointed by the Debates Commissioner to hold office on a part-time basis.

(2) The Advisory Board is to be composed of seven members, and its composition is to be reflective of gender balance and Canadian diversity and is to represent a range of political affiliations and expertise.

9 (1) The Advisory Board is to meet at least four times in the period of one year before a general election and at least two times in the period of five months after a general election.

(2) The meetings of the Advisory Board are to be chaired by the Debates Commissioner.

Report

10 (1) The Leaders' Debates Commission is to provide to the Minister of Democratic Institutions, no later than five months after the day on which a general election is held, a report in both official languages that

(a) presents an in-depth analysis of the Leaders' Debates Commission's experience in organizing leaders' debates for the general election in question; and

(b) provides thorough advice with regard to the future of the Leaders' Debates Commission, recommendations regarding the scope of the Commission's mandate and a detailed rationale for those recommendations, as well as a discussion of key considerations, including operation in the full range of electoral contexts such as minority governments, and ways to encourage leaders' participation in the leaders' debates.

(2) The Minister of Democratic Institutions is to table the report in Parliament.

ANNEXE

COMMISSION DES DÉBATS DES CHEFS

Commission

1 Est constituée la Commission des débats des chefs, composée du commissaire aux débats, du comité consultatif et du secrétariat.

2 Le mandat de la Commission est :

a) d'organiser un débat des chefs dans chaque langue officielle au cours de chaque période électorale d'une élection générale;

b) de veiller à ce que le chef de chaque parti politique qui répond à deux des critères ci-après soit invité à participer aux débats des chefs :

(i) au moment où l'élection générale en cause est déclenchée, le parti est représenté à la Chambre des communes par un député ayant été élu à titre de membre de ce parti,

(ii) il a l'intention, de l'avis du commissaire aux débats, de soutenir des candidats dans au moins quatre-vingt-dix pour cent des circonscriptions en vue de l'élection générale en cause,

(iii) ses candidats ont obtenu, lors de l'élection générale précédente, au moins quatre pour cent du nombre de votes validement exprimés ou les candidats qu'il soutient ont une véritable possibilité d'être élus lors de l'élection générale en cause, de l'avis du commissaire aux débats, compte tenu du contexte politique récent, des sondages d'opinion publique et des résultats obtenus aux élections générales précédentes;

c) de veiller à ce que les débats des chefs soient diffusés et autrement rendus disponibles, de manière accessible, aux personnes handicapées;

d) de veiller à ce que les débats des chefs rejoignent le plus grand nombre possible de Canadiens, y compris ceux qui vivent dans des régions éloignées et ceux qui font partie de communautés de langue officielle en situation minoritaire, au moyen d'un éventail de médias et d'autres tribunes;

e) de veiller à ce que les débats des chefs soient diffusés gratuitement, que la diffusion soit en direct ou non;

f) de veiller à ce que la reproduction des débats des chefs soit uniquement assujettie aux conditions qui sont nécessaires pour en préserver l'intégrité;

g) de veiller à ce que des normes journalistiques élevées soient appliquées lors des débats des chefs;

h) de mener une campagne et des activités de sensibilisation pour que les Canadiens sachent quand, où et comment avoir accès aux débats des chefs;

i) d'offrir des conseils et du soutien dans le cadre d'autres débats politiques liés à l'élection générale, notamment les débats de candidats, lorsque le commissaire aux débats le juge indiqué.

3 La
Commission :

a) effectue les recherches nécessaires ou s'appuie sur des recherches existantes, le cas échéant, pour que les débats des chefs soient de qualité élevée;

b) établit et maintient des relations constructives avec des leaders d'opinion et des intervenants clés;

c) exerce ses activités de manière à ne pas empêcher d'autres organismes de produire ou d'organiser des débats des chefs ou d'autres débats politiques;

d) veille à ce que les décisions concernant l'organisation des débats des chefs, y compris celles portant sur les critères de participation, soient rendues publiques rapidement;

e) veille à ce que les réponses des chefs aux invitations de participer aux débats soient rendues publiques avant et pendant les débats;

f) évalue les débats qu'elle a organisés, en se fondant sur des données probantes, notamment le nombre de personnes à qui les débats étaient accessibles et le nombre de personnes qui y ont effectivement eu accès, ainsi que les connaissances des Canadiens au sujet des partis politiques, de leurs chefs et de leurs positions.

4 Dans l'accomplissement de son mandat, la Commission est guidée par la poursuite de l'intérêt public et par les principes de l'indépendance, de l'impartialité, de la crédibilité, de la citoyenneté démocratique, de l'éducation civique, de l'inclusion et de l'efficacité financière.

5 (1) La Commission est mandataire de Sa Majesté et, à ce titre, elle peut conclure des marchés ou des ententes avec des tiers pour l'accomplissement de son mandat.

(2) La Commission veille à ce que les demandes de propositions pour la production des débats des chefs fassent état des critères précis selon lesquels les propositions seront évaluées, notamment la présentation de stratégies visant à :

a) augmenter autant que possible la portée des débats et la mobilisation des Canadiens, y compris ceux qui pourraient devoir composer avec des obstacles pour voter;

b) générer un effet d'entraînement en vue des débats des chefs, sensibiliser les Canadiens aux débats avant leur tenue et maintenir leur mobilisation par la suite;

c) améliorer l'accessibilité des débats des chefs aux Canadiens qui vivent avec un handicap, ceux qui vivent dans des régions éloignées et ceux qui font partie de communautés de langue officielle en situation minoritaire;

d) veiller à ce que les débats des chefs répondent à des normes élevées en matière de production et de journalisme et à ce que la neutralité quant à l'utilisation des marques soit respectée.

Commissaire aux débats

6 (1) Le commissaire aux débats est le directeur de la Commission et, à ce titre, il en dirige les affaires courantes et est responsable de l'embauche du personnel du secrétariat.

(2) Le commissaire aux débats est nommé à titre inamovible, sauf révocation motivée, et il exerce sa charge à temps partiel.

(3) Le commissaire aux débats tient compte des conseils fournis par le comité consultatif et, autant que faire se peut, les applique de telle sorte que l'organisation des débats des chefs bénéficie de l'expertise et de l'expérience des membres du comité et que les débats reflètent l'intérêt public.

Comité consultatif

7 Le mandat du comité consultatif est de conseiller le commissaire aux débats dans l'accomplissement de son mandat.

8 (1) Les membres du comité consultatif sont nommés par le commissaire aux débats et ils exercent leur charge à temps partiel.

(2) Le comité consultatif est composé de sept membres et sa composition reflète la parité entre les sexes et la diversité de la population canadienne et représente un éventail d'allégeances politiques et d'expertises.

9 (1) Le comité consultatif se réunit au moins quatre fois durant la période d'un an précédant l'élection générale et au moins deux fois durant la période de cinq mois suivant celle-ci.

(2) Les réunions du comité consultatif sont présidées par le commissaire aux débats.

Rapport

10 (1) La Commission présente au ministre des Institutions démocratiques, au plus tard cinq mois après la date à laquelle l'élection générale a eu lieu, un rapport dans les deux langues officielles, qui comprend :

a) une analyse approfondie de l'expérience de la Commission sur l'organisation des débats dans le cadre de l'élection générale en cause;

b) des conseils détaillés sur l’avenir de la Commission, des recommandations sur la portée du mandat de la Commission — lesquelles sont accompagnées d’une justification détaillée — ainsi qu’une discussion sur les principaux facteurs à prendre en considération, notamment ses activités dans le cadre de tous les contextes électoraux, par exemple en présence d’un gouvernement minoritaire, et sur les moyens à utiliser pour encourager la participation des chefs aux débats.

(2) Le ministre des Institutions démocratiques dépose le rapport devant le Parlement.



Government
of Canada

Gouvernement
du Canada

PC Number: 2020-0871

Date: 2020-11-05

Whereas, by Order in Council P.C. 2018-1322 of October 29, 2018, the Leaders’ Debates Commission was established;

And whereas it is desirable to amend the mandate of the Commission;

Therefore, Her Excellency the Governor General in Council, on the recommendation of the Prime Minister, amends the schedule to Order in Council P.C. 2018-1322 of October 29, 2018, as amended by Order in Council P.C. 2019-1381 of December 4, 2019,

(a) by replacing paragraph 2(b) with the following:

(b) set participation criteria for the leaders’ debates and ensure that the leader of each political party that meets those criteria is invited to participate in the debates;

(b.1) make the participation criteria public

(i) for a general election held in accordance with subsection 56.1(2) of the *Canada Elections Act*, no later than June 30 before the day set by that subsection; or

(ii) for a general election not held in accordance with subsection 56.1(2) of the *Canada Elections Act*, no later than seven days after the issue of the writs;

(b) by adding the following after paragraph 2(d):

(d.1) endeavour to ensure that the leaders' debates are available in languages other than French and English, and, in doing so, pay special attention to Canada's Indigenous languages;

.../2

- 2 -

(c) by adding the following after paragraph 2(g):

(g.1) provide final approval of the format and production of the leaders' debates, while respecting journalistic independence;

Attendu que, par le décret C.P. 2018-1322 du 29 octobre 2018, la Commission des débats des chefs a été créée;

Attendu qu'il est souhaitable de modifier le mandat de la Commission,

À ces causes, sur recommandation du premier ministre, Son Excellence la Gouverneure générale en conseil modifie l'annexe du décret C.P. 2018-1322 du 29 octobre 2018, tel qu'il a été modifié par le décret C.P. 2019-1381 du 4 décembre 2019 :

a) par remplacement de l'alinéa 2b) par ce qui suit :

b) d'établir des critères de participation aux débats des chefs et de veiller à ce que le chef de chaque parti politique qui répond à ces critères soit invité à participer aux débats;

b.1) de rendre publics ces critères :

(i) pour une élection générale tenue conformément au paragraphe 56.1(2) de la *Loi électorale du Canada*, au plus tard le 30 juin précédant le jour visé à ce paragraphe,

(ii) pour une élection générale qui n'est pas tenue conformément au paragraphe 56.1(2) de la *Loi électorale du Canada*, au plus tard sept jours après la délivrance des brefs;

b) par adjonction, après l'alinéa 2d), de ce qui suit :

d.1) de veiller à ce que les débats des chefs soient disponibles dans des langues autres que le français et l'anglais et, ce faisant, d'accorder une attention particulière aux langues autochtones du Canada;

.../2

- 2 -

c) par adjonction, après l'alinéa 2g), de ce qui suit :

g.1) de donner l'approbation finale quant au format et à la production des débats des chefs, tout en respectant l'indépendance journalistique;

Appendix 2 – Leaders’ Debates Commission – Advisory Board Terms of Reference

Mandate

The Leaders' Debates Commission advisory board is established to provide advice to the Debates Commissioner on matters relating to the organization of debates in Canada's two official languages during the 2019-2021 federal election campaigns. Considering that leaders' debates are an essential contribution to the health of Canadian democracy, board members will be guided by the pursuit of the public interest and by the principles of independence, impartiality, credibility, democratic citizenship, civic education, inclusion and cost-effectiveness.

Membership

The Advisory Board is to be composed of seven members, and its composition is to be reflective of gender balance and Canadian diversity and is to represent a range of political affiliations and expertise.

Members are appointed by the Debates Commissioner to hold office on a part-time basis. The Advisory Board will meet at least four times in the period of one year before a general election and at least two times in the period of five months after a general election. The meetings will be chaired by the Debates Commissioner.

Role of Board members

The Board members will advise the Commission on how to carry out its mandate, including issues such as:

- ensuring that the debates are broadcast and distributed widely and free of charge.
- ensuring that the debates reach as many Canadians as possible, including those living in remote areas, those living in official language minority communities and those living with disabilities.
- ensuring that the debates are conducted under high journalistic standards.
- ensuring that calls for proposals for the production and distribution of the debates identify clear criteria by which the proposals will be evaluated.
- ensuring that the Commission undertake an awareness raising campaign and outreach activities to foster interest in and awareness of the debates.
- ensuring that the Commission provide advice and support for other debates relative to the general election.
- ensuring that the criteria for participation of political parties in the debates be applied fairly and in full transparency.
- providing advice on evidence-based assessment of the leaders' debates and recommendations for the Commission's report to government.

Compensation of Board members

Members of the Board shall be eligible for reimbursement of reasonable travel expenses from their residence to Ottawa and shall be compensated for their participation in meetings of the Board at a rate of \$450.00 per diem.

Operating principles

Regardless of their backgrounds and affiliations, members shall serve in an individual capacity, having regard to the public interest, and not as the delegates or representatives of particular organizations, sectors or groups. While knowledge of political context and processes is needed, particular care must be taken to avoid political partisanship.

Members of the Board should declare any actual or potential conflicts of interest at the start of all meetings, including meetings of committees or working groups. A determination of whether recusal is appropriate shall be made in consultation with the Commissioner.

Deliberations by the Board and its committees and working groups shall be open, frank and confidential, in conformity with Chatham House Rules. Different perspectives should be presented with candour and accorded respect. In communicating with stakeholders and media about the Board and its work, Board members should respect the confidentiality of their colleagues and shall not attribute statements or views to individual fellow members.

Appendix 3 – Stakeholders Consulted

Former leaders' debate producers from CBC, CTV and Radio Canada (see Appendix 3 Producer Workshop)

Producers, moderators and executives who have produced, moderated and organized in the USA, France, United Kingdom and Germany (see Appendix 6 International Lessons Learned)

Accessible Media Inc. (AMI)

André Blais, Université de Montréal

Aengus Bridgman, Canadian Elections Study

Bloc Québécois

Canadian Association of Journalists (CAJ)

Canadian Broadcasting Corporation

Conseil de presse du Québec (CPQ)

Conservative Party of Canada

David Coletto (Abacus Data)

The Commission on Presidential Debates

Council of Canadians with Disabilities

CRIC

The Cyber Centre

Sabreena Delhon, The Samara Centre for Democracy

Department of Indigenous Languages, Department of Canadian Heritage

Jennifer Ditchburn, Institute for Research on Public Policy (IRPP)

Claire Durand, Professor at l'Université de Montréal, former President of the World Association for Public Opinion Research

Joanna Everitt, University of New Brunswick

Fédération professionnelle des journalistes du Québec (FPJQ)

Brian Gallant

Edward Greenspon, Public Policy Forum

Green Party of Canada

Graham Fox

Allison Harell, Université du Québec à Montréal, co-investigator of the Canadian Election Study

Donna Jodhan

Richard Johnston, Professor emeritus at the University of British Columbia, former co-investigator of the Canadian Election Study Liberal Party of Canada

Peter Loewen, University of Toronto and co-investigator of the Canadian Election Study

Joanne MacDonald, former Vice-President of CTV News

John McAndrews, Postdoctoral Fellow, Department of Political Science and the Munk School of Global Affairs & Public Policy, University of Toronto

Jennifer McGuire, former Editor-in-Chief of CBC News

Spencer McKay, Postdoctoral Fellow, Centre for the Study of Democratic Institutions, University of British Columbia

National NewsMedia Council (NNC)

New Democratic Party

People's Party of Canada

Privy Council Office – Machinery of Government

Public Services and Procurement Canada (PSPC)

Radio-Canada

Daniel Rubenson, Ryerson University, co-investigator of the Canadian Election Study

Tamara Small, University of Guelph

Laura Stephenson, Western University, co-investigator of the Canadian Election Study

Translation Bureau

Christopher Waddell, Professor, School of Journalism and Communication, Carleton University

Written submissions from approximately 1,100 members of the public

Appendix 4 – Media Coverage

Overview

In general, both the French- and English-language media coverage related to the 2021 general election leaders' debates was factual, balanced and neutral. Coverage centred on messages associated with the Commission's announcements related to its amended Order in Council mandate. As expected, there was a range of views expressed in opinion pieces and editorials. Criticism focused on format, moderation, number of debates and the role of the Commission.

Methodology

The following analysis is a broad, though not fully comprehensive, review of the media coverage beginning with the Commission's announcement of the debate producer. We have attempted to illustrate both the neutral/positive and negative coverage received during this last election cycle. We have not quantified the overall volume of coverage, though it was noticeably higher than in 2019. Nor have we attempted to assess how the coverage received in 2021, may have influenced public opinion related to the Commission's activities or the debates themselves.

Announcement of the Debate Broadcast Group (DBG):

Media coverage of the Debate Broadcast Group as the producer of the leaders' debates was factual and neutral/positive in both tone and content. The media highlighted the inclusion of APTN as a broadcast partner in the partnership of news organizations, translation into indigenous languages and other non-official languages as well as the debate's wide & free distribution across Canada.

The headline of the Canadian Press story on the day of the announcement (April 1, 2021) was: "Canada's next federal election leaders' debates includes APTN as broadcast partner"

CTV News, on the same date, featured the tweets from the Commission in its story and wrote the following:

"The debates will be widely distributed on broadcast, digital and social platforms...They will also be broadcast in Indigenous languages and non-official languages, and will be made available in ASL, LSQ, closed caption and described video."

Le Devoir's article highlighted all the French-language media partners in the Groupe de diffusion des débats (GDD) and the free signal for Canadians.

Participation criteria decision:

The media coverage was factual and neutral in both French and English. The exclusion of Maxime Bernier, the leader of the People’s Party of Canada, from the two leaders’ debates, dominated by far the headlines and received national attention. Almost all major newspapers covering the story in both languages led with this decision, which had been based on participation criteria set by the Commission in June 2021. Coverage focused on the PPC receiving 3.27 per cent in the national polls and therefore not meeting the 4 per cent threshold set for inclusion in the leaders’ debates.

“Five federal party leaders invited to election debates; Bernier out,” wrote CTV News. “Maxime Bernier, western separatist party both denied participation in official federal debates,” headlined the Toronto Star. “People’s Party out of federal election debate as new criteria announced,” titled Global News.

All French-language media outlets led with the decision on Maxime Bernier. «Maxime Bernier exclu des débats des chefs, » wrote La Presse. «Le chef du Parti populaire du Canada, Maxime Bernier, est exclu des débats des chefs, » headlined L’actualité. « Pas de Maxime Bernier à tous les débats, » added TVA Nouvelles.

The criteria established were widely accepted and not disputed by the PPC, nor by any other party or organ. Maxime Bernier said he was “disappointed, but not surprised” by the decision. “I do not blame the commission, whose criteria were clear and objective.”

The Globe and Mail’s Andrew Coyne did ask why the establishment of 4 per cent? Why five days? in an opinion piece where he argued that Bernier should have been at the leaders’ debates. “A line has to be drawn somewhere, but the reasoning behind the line-drawing should be transparent and fair. In this case, it seems to have been drawn to no other purpose but to keep the Peeps out,” he wrote. “It is not up to some faceless commissioner to decide who should be eligible to participate. It is up to the voters.”

<https://www.theglobeandmail.com/opinion/article-why-maxime-bernier-and-his-noxious-views-should-be-at-the-leaders/> (Sept 8, 2021)

The French editorials and opinion piece supported the Commission’s decision on the 4 per cent threshold, which the PPC had not succeeded in reaching.

“We didn't ask him for the moon! His party had to have at least 4% of the vote OR be represented in Ottawa by an MP who was elected as a member of the party OR have received at least 4% of the vote in

the most recent federal election. If only one of these criteria was met, they could take part in the debates. And let's not forget that sorting out the leaders for debates is not new. It's perfectly normal. You can't give a free pass to anyone who wants to speak." (Alexandre Sirois, La Presse, August 25 2021, Donnez un miroir à Bernier !)

<https://www.lapresse.ca/debats/editoriaux/2021-08-25/droit-au-but/donnez-un-miroir-a-bernier.php>
(August 25, 2021)

"Maxime Bernier will not have a place in the leaders' debates. I say "Bravo". A political leader who uses the words "despot", "segregation" and "cartel" in every possible way clearly has no place in a transnational debate at a time as important as ours." (Marie-Eve Doyon, Journal de Québec, August 31, 2021 Non, Bernier ne méritait pas sa place au débat)

<https://www.journaldequebec.com/2021/08/31/non-bernier-ne-meritait-pas-sa-place-au-debat>
(August 31, 2021)

The Debates

French leaders' debate, Sept 8, 2021:

Criticism of the French-language debate focused on whether the debate had given rise to meaningful exchanges. Comments centered on the following: a busy format, too many questions, overproduced, too many journalists on stage and little opportunity for leaders to debate.

The format did not dominate coverage in the English-language press, rather mentioned in passing, as a one-liner in articles discussing the issues tackled in the debate. The Calgary Herald noted that the moderator Patrice Roy "did an admirable job of keeping the participants in line and within their time limits."

The French-language debate was less criticized than the English-language debate.

The French press described the French-language debate in these terms:

A debate with "lot of things" in it, but "I don't know if people will have found it worthwhile. There were too many questions, and not enough time on the issues. By doing this, the politicians are given less time to think about their answers and they respond with ready-made answers." - (La Presse, Sept 9, 2021)

<https://www.lapresse.ca/elections-federales/2021-09-09/debat-des-chefs/qui-a-gagne-nos-experts-se-prononcent.php>

The format "was supposed to contrast the proposals of the five main party leaders more often led to dull exchanges, punctuated by a few telling moments."— (Boris Proulx, Mylène Crête, Le Devoir, Sept 9, 2021)

<https://www.ledevoir.com/politique/canada/630897/debat-sobre-en-vue-du-scrutin>

“These debates (French and English leaders’ debates) seemed designed to showcase news anchors and journalists rather than leaders.... This debate (French) was less painful than its English counterpart, but I found no other quality in it... Patrice Roy seemed to want to take the opportunity to show once and for all that he is the host of the hour... To debate is to discuss a topic or situation with one or more interlocutors. It is not answering questions. Yet that is what the leaders' debate has been reduced to, barely giving each other time to respond, let alone debate... Too happy to appear on camera, the invited journalists took the opportunity to show off their knowledge.” – (Guy Fournier, Journal de Montréal, Sept 14, 2021) <https://www.journaldemontreal.com/2021/09/14/des-debats-qui-sont-une-triste-farce>

“The format was very busy. A lot was asked of the leaders, it was a tall order compared to last week. There were several types of questions, the rapid-fire questions from the reporters were very intrusive... There was a lot of information to take in. I don't know if people have been able to hear and grasp all the information that the politicians have tried to present to them... Have we been well informed, have questions been answered? Did citizens hear what they wanted? I don't know, there were so many things!” – (Judith Desmeules, Le Soleil, Sept 8, 2021)

<https://www.lesoleil.com/2021/09/09/deuxieme-debat-en-francais-charge-pour-des-chefs-disciplines-a72cd84722b2282121626ade47125263>

“I hate the formula, it limits exchanges. The questions from the citizens? Do we need this? No. I don't think this debate will change much.” (Paul Arcand, 98.5 FM, September 9, 2021)

<https://www.985fm.ca/nouvelles/opinions/422528/revue-de-presse-474>

The English-language press described the French debate in these terms:

“largely flat debate Wednesday, where each participant mostly served viewers pre-packaged lines on hot-button issues” (Christopher Nardi, National Post, September 9, 2021)

“allowed for few interactions between Trudeau and O'Toole - seemed to take the sting from most of the attacks” (Althia Raj, Toronto Star, September 9, 2021)

“kept the leaders from directly confronting each other for significant portions of the program” (Tonda MacCharles, Toronto Star, September 8, 2021)

“an over-produced, stilted all-leaders French-language debate” (Justin Ling, Macleans, September 9, 2021)

There was also coverage of the injunction successfully pursued by one organization originally denied media accreditation.

“Rebel News wins court battle to cover leaders’ debates, will accredit 11 journalists” (Canadian Press, Sept 8, 2021)

“A judge in the Federal Court of Canada has ruled the Leaders’ Debates Commission incorrectly denied Rebel News Network accreditation to Wednesday’s French-language and Thursday’s English-language competition between the major party leaders.”

<https://nationalpost.com/news/politics/election-2021/judge-to-rule-today-whether-rebel-news-may-be-accredited-to-cover-the-leaders-debates>

English leaders’ debate, Sept 9, 2021:

Criticism of the English-language debate centered on the format, which was not deemed to have given rise to debate and meaningful exchanges, too many journalists on stage, the moderation and questions. There was over 130 articles written on the English debate, almost four times the amount than for the French debate.

The format was widely criticized. The following words and phrases were used to describe the debate: “a farce, fractious, ghastly, an embarrassment, poorly conceived, stupidly structured, restrictive, disservice to viewers, an insult to the intelligence, failed to offer viewers a fair portrait of the principal leaders, train wreck, clumsy, an all time low, an embarrassing failure, a nadir on the history of debating, frenetic, and a debacle, not a debate.”

There were calls to “take the entire format back to the drawing board” and produce an “old-style debate to provide clarity” as this format had resulted in “changed channels and not minds” given the leaders “were stifled by the debate format and the moderator’s shrill discipline” in this “tightly controlled” environment.

“A restrictive format and questioners who suppressed confrontation conspired to prevent Liberal Leader Justin Trudeau from facing his Conservative tormentor – sorry, opponent – Erin O’Toole Thursday night, in a blandly passive English-language leaders’ debate.”

<https://www.theglobeandmail.com/politics/article-trudeau-otoole-prevented-from-launching-attacks-at-each-other-in/> (Globe and Mail, Sept 9, 2021)

“The debate format did not allow for in-depth discussion.”

<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-58495746> (BBC, Sept 10, 2021)

The farce of Canada’s televised federal leaders’ debate is an insult to viewers and voters

“But the so-called federal leaders’ debate on Thursday evening took the cake. What happened across multiple Canadian TV channels was the worst of the worst, an example of utter failure in Canadian television, and a disgraceful insult to the intelligence of viewers and voters.

That was not a debate, it was a farce. The fact that the political leaders even agreed to participate in the format is an indictment of their collective intelligence.”

<https://www.theglobeandmail.com/arts/television/article-farce-of-a-televised-election-debate-an-insult-to-viewers-and-voters/> (Globe and Mail – Sept 10, 2021)

Leaders spar over climate, foreign policy in debate, but format leaves some unhappy

“The format of the debate may have left many viewers unsatisfied.

The five leaders frequently talked over one another. Leaders on the receiving end of accusations or loaded questions from rivals were often given no chance to respond.”

<https://www.msn.com/en-ca/news/other/leaders-gearing-up-for-english-language-debate-tonight-after-french-joust/ar-AAOfHMR> (Canadian Press - Sept 10, 2021)

Leaders' debates commission under fire after controversial English debate

“The two-hour fractious debate has been roundly condemned for giving leaders too little time to explain their policies or rebut attacks from rivals, and giving too much time to moderator Shachi Kurl and journalist questioners to interrupt.”

<https://www.ctvnews.ca/politics/federal-election-2021/leaders-debates-commission-under-fire-after-controversial-english-debate-1.5581264> (Canadian Press, September 10, 2021)

“The format of the debate was stifling and harried. Like the French-language debate the night before, it was conducted at the pace of a lightning round. Trudeau at times seemed to be hurrying to get as many words in as possible before he was cut off.”

<https://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/analysis-debate-english-language-1.6170302> (CBC, Sept 10, 2021)

Five takeaways from the federal election debate, a disjointed but feisty showdown

“Much of the pre-debate chatter reasoned that a tightly structured format—a rotating cast of questioners, the switches between open debate and two- or three-person jousting sessions, and the citizen questions—would limit any particular leader’s ability to shine. In actuality, the moderators’ dogged fidelity to their structure and timeline squeezed most of the light out of this affair.

Lead moderator Shachi Kurl, a pollster and former journalist, rapidly cut off many attempts to pivot from one topic to the next, and hawkishly watched the clock to ensure all of the myriad elements of the program had their slotted times. It led to a moment that some observers believe will raise anger in Quebec, and potentially draw votes to the Bloc: Kurl wound up arguing with Yves-François Blanchet, the Bloc Québécois leader, who claimed he’d been shorted when it came to timing...

At another point, Kurl offered Trudeau an absurdly paltry five seconds to respond to various critiques of his record. Some past debates have gone wildly off topic or off-kilter and would have benefited from a moderator with a tighter leash. Kurl’s leash often seemed like a choke chain, stifling many exchanges from blossoming into actual, you know, debates.”

<https://www.macleans.ca/politics/federal-election-debate-five-takeaways-from-a-disjointed-but-feisty-showdown/> (Macleans, Sept 10, 2021)

Canada's official leaders' debates a farce

“How a gaggle of presumably media-savvy people organizing these debates have not yet figured out that you can’t have 10-people participating in a two-hour debate — five political leaders, four journalists and a moderator — without the whole thing turning into a giant fustercluck, is hard to comprehend...

“The key to these leaders’ debates working is to have one competent moderator who is in charge of the format and the only one asking questions...

But the real problem with the Debate Broadcast Group — as its name implies — is that the television networks carrying it want their own media representative featured prominently on the show asking questions of the political leaders, which inevitably turns it into a train wreck...

If the Debate Broadcast Group can’t agree on a single moderator for the official French and English language debates (the French one was the better of the two but not as good as the TVA debate) it should be disbanded.”

<https://torontosun.com/opinion/columnists/goldstein-canadas-official-leaders-debates-a-farce> (September 10, 2021)

Canadians deserved better than just one lousy debate

“The reason to have a leaders’ debate — or, oh to dream, more than one debate — is not to provide a platform for the host. It’s not about giving the networks airtime to promote their anchors. It’s not about

providing five “average person” lottery winners a chance to “have their say.” It’s not one more opportunity to tick racial and gender boxes for all of the above. And it isn’t a place for journalists to interrogate politicians – that’s a press conference, something each of the leaders does, regularly. The point of a leaders’ debate is for the leaders to debate. That’s it. That’s all. That’s everything...

Yet Thursday night’s debate – this election’s only one in English – was designed to prevent debate from breaking out. Why? Beats us. Journalists read questions that were longer than the time given to the leaders’ answers, and leaders who wanted to debate with one another were quickly shut down by the moderator.

Canadians deserve better. Our parliamentary democracy, bequeathed to us by the hard fights of our history, and which people around the world dream of living under, deserves better. And yes, our political leaders deserve better.

The official consortium cooked up a format designed to foster cynicism about politics and politicians, making a group of five leaders – all smart, educated, experienced and in command of their briefs – look dumb and empty, like cardboard cut-outs of who they actually are.

As for Thursday night’s fiasco, there was no sense that the producers understood that there was anything special about the stage or the moment. There was no wonder or reverence for the process or its product, the twin marvels of representative democracy and responsible government. It might as well have been another episode of The Great Canadian Baking Show.”

<https://www.theglobeandmail.com/opinion/editorials/article-canadians-deserved-better-than-just-one-lousy-debate/> (Globe and Mail – Sept 11, 2021, The Editorial Board)

There was criticism in the English- and French-language press on the role of the moderator in the English debate and one question posed in this debate, which garnered national attention.

Legault wants apology for 'unacceptable' federal debate question on Quebec laws

“That was an attack on the Quebec nation, Legault told reporters in Quebec City, adding that Kurl and the group of broadcasters that organized the debate need to apologize.”

<https://www.ctvnews.ca/politics/federal-election-2021/legault-wants-apology-for-unacceptable-federal-debate-question-on-quebec-laws-1.5581145> (Canadian Press – Sept 10, 2021)

Trudeau, O'Toole call debate question on Quebec's secularism offensive, unfair

"As a Quebecer, I found that question really offensive." –Trudeau

<https://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/trudeau-debate-blanchet-bill21-1.6171124>

(CBC – Sept 10, 2021)

Leaders were stifled by debate format and moderator's shrill discipline

"The first thing that must be said about Thursday night's leaders' debate is that the format stunk. There was no provision for real debate among the five party leaders and no time to delve into the five issues."

https://www.chroniclejournal.com/opinion/leaders-were-stifled-by-debate-format-and-moderator-s-shrill-discipline/article_344bd626-13d2-11ec-b95a-bf23471a2903.html (Chronicle Journal Sept 12, 2021)

Justin Trudeau gets 'mugged by four thugs' in a ghastly English election debate

"It was ghastly, an embarrassment, an insult to the intelligence of Canadians, and a disservice to voters who hoped to learn something useful about the five leaders and the issues in next Monday's election.

What they got was a poorly conceived debate, stupidly structured, badly organized, and ineptly directed by a moderator who behaved as though she was a sixth debater instead of a neutral referee."

<https://www.thespec.com/opinion/contributors/2021/09/12/justin-trudeau-gets-mugged-by-four-thugs-in-a-ghastly-english-election-debate.html> (Hamilton Spectator – Sept 12, 2021)

Opinion: Ill-advised, ill-informed question could shake up election in Quebec

"Reading most of English Canada's press this past weekend, one would not have guessed that a controversy had erupted in Quebec after the party leaders' English debate Thursday night, a controversy so huge and emotional that it could change the election results in the province and, therefore, the composition of the next Parliament."

<https://montrealgazette.com/opinion/opinion-ill-advised-ill-informed-question-could-shake-up-election-in-quebec/wcm/b929255d-53ef-4a4c-b65c-952705bc3208/amp/>

(Montreal Gazette – Sept 13, 2021)

Quebec legislature unanimously condemns 'Quebec bashing' at federal leaders' debate

"The Liberal motion said the first question asked to Bloc Quebecois Leader Yves-Francois Blanchet by debate moderator Shachi Kurl likened Quebec to a racist and discriminatory society."

<https://www.thestar.com/politics/federal-election/2021/09/14/quebec-legislature-unanimously-condemns-quebec-bashing-at-federal-leaders-debate.html>

(Canadian Press – Sept 14, 2021)

The debate about the debate that could swing the election

"The 2021 campaign may go down as the first to see a debate moderator's question become a ballot-box inflection point... Kurl's question ignited outrage among Quebec's political and pundit class."

<https://www.politico.com/newsletters/ottawa-playbook/2021/09/15/the-debate-about-the-debate-that-could-swing-the-election-494327> (Politico – Sept 15, 2021)

Trudeau, O’Toole, Singh call for apology over Bill 21 English debate question

“All three major party leaders are calling for an apology from the consortium of media broadcasters involved in the federal leaders’ debates over a question about Quebec laws during the recent English-language debate.

The question, posed by moderator Shachi Kurl to Bloc Québécois Leader Yves-François Blanchet during the Sept. 9 debate, has set off a firestorm of criticism in Quebec, including a unanimous call from the provincial National Assembly for a formal apology for the “hostile” views expressed against “the Quebec nation.”

<https://www.theglobeandmail.com/politics/article-trudeau-otoole-singh-call-for-apology-over-bill-21-english-debate/>

(Globe and Mail- Sept 15, 2021)

Controversial question in English debate may have galvanized Bloc voters

“The exchange had the effect of reviving an old wound, leaving Quebecers feeling disrespected and misunderstood by the rest of Canada, according to several experts interviewed by CBC.

It created a situation in which a debate that is typically almost ignored in Quebec may have changed the game for the federal election on the ground.”

<https://www.cbc.ca/amp/1.6176663> (CBC – Sept 16, 2021)

Opinion: Shachi Kurl's precarious and astonishing debate question was twisted and insipid

“It was a twisted, insipid question, full of dubious amalgams, inaccuracies and imprecision.”

https://beta.ctvnews.ca/local/montreal/2021/9/17/1_5589973.html

(CTV News - Sept 17, 2021)

How an ‘unacceptable’ debate question about Quebec could change the election outcome

“A question posed to Bloc Quebecois Leader Yves-Francois Blanchet during the English-language debate last week may have changed the trajectory of the election in Quebec.”

<https://montreal.citynews.ca/2021/09/18/unacceptable-debate-question-quebec-election-outcome/>

(CityNews – Sept 18, 2021)

The French-language media provided more coverage as it related to the question posed and the role of the moderator.

Débat des chefs en anglais | «La modératrice est censée modérer les échanges, pas sortir le lance-flamme!»

<https://www.985fm.ca/nouvelles/politique/422920/debat-des-chefs-en-anglais-la-moderatrice-est-censee-moderer-les-echanges-pas-sortir-le-lance-flamme>

(98.5 FM – Sept 10, 2021)

Québec « déçu du manque de neutralité »

« C'est Ian Lafrenière qui a résumé le point de vue gouvernemental. « Ma réaction, c'est de dire que c'est extrêmement décevant. Je pensais qu'on était rendu ailleurs en 2021. Quand je suis sorti de ce débat, honnêtement, j'étais vraiment très déçu, déçu qu'on était encore rendu là dans ce genre de phrase et le manque de neutralité. Alors déçu », a-t-il affirmé. »

<https://www.lapresse.ca/elections-federales/2021-09-10/debat-des-chefs-en-anglais/quebec-decu-du-manque-de-neutralite.php>

(La Presse, Sept 10, 2021)

Débat des chefs en anglais: des flammèches entre les chefs... et la modératrice

« Les flammèches ont volé au Musée canadien de l'histoire, à Gatineau, dès les premières minutes de la joute oratoire. »

<https://www.msn.com/fr-ca/actualites/other/d%C3%A9bat-des-chefs-en-anglais-un-dernier-affrontement-avant-le-sprint-final/ar-AAOh5nL?li=AAanjZr>

(Presse Canadienne – Sept 10, 2021)

Question controversée au débat des chefs : «ça frise le caractère haineux»

« Ça démontre une bonne dose d'ignorance, beaucoup de mépris et ça frise le caractère haineux. Pourquoi? Parce que ce n'était pas seulement une question. Il y avait une affirmation sur le caractère raciste au départ», déclare Stéphane Bédard à La Joute...

«Je pense qu'on est tous tombés sur le cul, lance-t-il. Je pense que c'est une question inacceptable. Il y a un amalgame de plein de choses là-dedans qui n'ont pas trop rapport les uns avec les autres. »

<https://www.tvanouvelles.ca/2021/09/10/question-controversee-au-debat-des-chefs--ca-frise-le-caractere-haineux>

(TVA Nouvelles – Sept 10, 2021)

L'étincelle

« D'entrée de jeu, plusieurs se demandaient pour quelle raison on avait confié ce rôle à la présidente d'Angus Reid, Shachi Kurl, qui avait plutôt les allures d'une militante, alors que les médias du Canada anglais ne manquent pas de journalistes chevronnés. »

<https://www.ledevoir.com/opinion/chroniques/631494/chronique-l-etincelle>

(Le Devoir, Sept 11, 2021)

Le Mépris

« Ce n'est généralement pas une bonne idée pour la modératrice d'un débat des chefs de manifester un parti pris envers l'un ou l'autre des politiciens qu'elle est chargée d'interroger. Or, la première question qu'a posée Shachi Kurl à Yves-François Blanchet lors du débat en anglais de jeudi soir a choqué beaucoup de Québécois, même parmi ceux qui s'opposent à la loi 21 et au projet de loi 96.

Je suis convaincu que M^{me} Kurl était de bonne foi et ne cherchait pas à semer la polémique. Mais en qualifiant d'emblée ces deux mesures de « discriminatoires », elle a fait preuve d'un manque flagrant de neutralité. »

<https://www.ledevoir.com/opinion/chroniques/631428/chronique-le-mepri>

(Le Devoir – Sept 11, 2021)

Accusé Blanchet, levez-vous !

« La première question au chef du Bloc québécois lancée par la modératrice n'était pas une question.

C'était un acte d'accusation. »

<https://www.lapresse.ca/actualites/chroniques/2021-09-11/accuse-blanchet-levez-vous.php>

(La Presse, Sept 16, 2021)

La question bancale et saugrenue de Shachi Kurl

« Il s'agissait d'une question tordue, insipide, truffée d'amalgames douteux, d'inexactitudes et d'imprécisions. »

<https://www.lapresse.ca/debats/opinions/2021-09-16/debat-des-chefs-en-anglais/la-question-bancale-et-saugrenue-de-shachi-kurl.php>

(La Presse, Sept 16, 2021)

More Debates

There were several news articles in the English-language press, which criticized and noted that one English-language debate was not enough.

Canada's sorry excuse for election debates fail us all

“This campaign season, French-speaking voters will have three chances to witness the major parties’ leaders face off against one another... However, English-speaking voters will only have one such occasion — a government-mandated debate on September 9. In a country with two official languages, it seems only right they’d have an equal number of debates, particularly considering 75 per cent of the nation lists English as their first official language. And, to be clear, in a healthy democracy, that number should total more than one.

One debate isn’t nearly enough to address the wide range of issues at play, now more so than ever. There could be an entire debate centred around COVID-19 response and recovery, another on the economy, and yet another on social issues.

In 2015, there were three unofficial English-language debates. Despite the formation of the Leaders’ Debates Commission in 2018 with the supposed goal of promoting more and better debates, they only held one in 2019 and it was widely panned for being heavy on personal attacks and light on actual substance.

The Commission is officially charged with creating a minimum of one debate in each language, and it seems they’re content to scrape by with the bare minimum. Some point to the reluctance of traditional broadcasters to give up primetime slots, but it is a private broadcaster, TVA, that is hosting the extra French debate. And in today’s digital age there’s no shortage of options for airing such events. Leaders may even find they (gasp!) reach new demographics this way.

It was Justin Trudeau’s Liberals who created the commission and gave it this paltry mandate, and it’s also Trudeau who seems the key barrier to holding more English-language debates

I hope some debate organizer has the gumption to place a cardboard cutout of the Liberal leader behind a podium. We like to play nice in Canada, but organizations shouldn’t hesitate to draw attention to an incumbent who roadblocks democratic progress. In a five-week campaign, particularly one where in-person events are limited, there should be multiple opportunities to really get to know the candidates beyond their own campaign safety bubbles.”

<https://nationalpost.com/opinion/sabrina-maddeaux-canadas-sorry-excuse-for-election-debates-fail-us-all>

(National Post – Sept 2, 2021)

Three leaders' debates — two of which are in French — simply aren't enough

“But the fact that there is a second French-language leader’s debate is important to note, because there is only one English-language leaders’ debate (which will take place this coming Thursday, Sept. 9). That’s not to say we should only have an even number of leaders’ debates in an election campaign, but it doesn’t seem right that there should be twice as many in one official language... Between those two snubs and the fact that the Leaders’ Debate Commission has a mandate for only a bare minimum of two debates, it tells us a lot about how much Trudeau values these debates.”

<https://globalnews.ca/news/8164357/canada-election-leaders-debate/>

(Global News – September 4, 2021)

Two debates for Quebec. One for the other 30 million of us

“For this clutter of secondary provinces and outlying territories, there is one debate. One.

The people who set up these debates are under the illusion that Canada is a very small country and every place outside Quebec is a carbon copy of every other place. Hence, their careful rationing of debates.

However, everybody else in Canada knows the truth is the opposite. Canada is very large, regions and provinces wildly different from each other, and all parts of Canada have their own issues of national importance...

One debate for almost 30 million people, nine provinces and three territories. It is to laugh.”

<https://nationalpost.com/opinion/rex-murphy-two-debates-for-quebec-one-for-the-other-30-million-of-us>

(National Post - Sept 8, 2021 – Rex Murphy- opinion)

Canadians deserved better than just one lousy debate

“Can the next Parliament please fix this state of affairs? Canadians deserve more debates, longer debates and far better debates – debates that are actual debates.”

<https://www.theglobeandmail.com/opinion/editorials/article-canadians-deserved-better-than-just-one-lousy-debate/>

(Globe and Mail – Sept 11, 2021 editorial board)

Role of the Commission

Criticism centered on the role exercised by the debates producer and the Commission’s responsibility as it relates to its mandate.

Between the leaders debates

“For starters, the participating news organizations want maximum on-screen time for their journalists. Every organization that participated in the consortium sent a prominent colleague. None preferred to sit the night out, for the sake of simplicity and clarity. That’s how you get five people in moderator/interrogator roles. And if *La Presse*’s Paul Journet wasn’t all that interested in pressing leaders on their non-answers to questions from H  l  ne Buzzetti of the newspaper syndicate Les Coops de l’Info... well, that brings us to the parties’ interest.

The parties want minimum on-screen time for their leaders.

The consortium debates’ oligarchy isn’t the product of a mandate from heaven, only from Ottawa. And it doesn’t improve the product. One day, people will figure that out.”

<https://www.macleans.ca/politics/ottawa/between-the-leaders-debates/>

(Macleans - Sept 9, 2021)

Leaders' debates commission under fire after controversial English debate

The Leaders' Debates Commission was created to put an end to machinations by the big political parties to control how, when, what and who leaders would debate during federal election campaigns.

But after Thursday's controversial English-language debate, some critics are calling for an end to the independent commission or at least an overhaul of its mandate...

The TV networks had also been criticized for caring more about putting on a good show than helping to inform voters.

The debates commission, headed by former governor general David Johnston, was meant to rectify all that.

But it gave most of the responsibility for producing the debates to network consortiums. For the English debate, the consortium included CBC News, CTV News, APTN News and Global News.

"They (the commission) seem to have accepted the advice of whoever is producing the thing to turn it into a TV show," Alboim said in an interview.

"Not to understand that you've created a format where people can lob accusations in mid-air and get no response or no rebuttal is a dereliction of duty," Alboim said.

It meant Trudeau, who was the primary target of those attacks, was left playing the role of "pin cushion."

"They would each do a drive-by smear and then move on to something else and he wouldn't get a chance to respond so, of course, he suffered from the format."

<https://www.ctvnews.ca/politics/federal-election-2021/leaders-debates-commission-under-fire-after-controversial-english-debate-1.5581264>

(Canadian Press - September 10, 2021)

Our election debates have become embarrassing failures. How did we sink so low?

“The blame for the embarrassing debate failures this year is widely shared. The networks push their journalists to become stars of the show, and several played almost partisan and celebrity-seeking roles. The moderator had great difficulty with her role, displaying the exasperation of a newbie teacher attempting to corral a careening group of sugar-high kids.

The newly minted Leaders’ Debates Commission was created to address previous criticisms...

The commission said they had considered two debates in each language, but were concerned that might “dilute” the viewership. What specious nonsense. Every insider knows why they folded on that essential question: the networks are still really in charge, and they do not want to give up the airtime.

It is indeed ironic that some of the most iconic debates of decades past were moderated with great professionalism by the commission chair David Johnston. He and the other commissioners might want to have a viewing of those past debates together, and then consider whether the flashy game shows they have created are an improvement...

If the networks are not happy with those parameters, show them the door. There are many universities and citizens’ organizations perfectly capable of staging serious, professional political debates. Parliament should grant a new commission an annual budget to fund the debates themselves, granting those groups asked to host sufficient funds to produce an intelligent, informative program.

The Leaders’ Debates Commission is part of the problem.”

<https://www.thestar.com/opinion/contributors/2021/09/12/our-election-debates-have-become-embarrassing-failures-how-did-we-sink-so-low.html>

(Toronto Star – Sept 12, 2021)

La Commission aux débats a failli à sa tâche

« Si la Commission était au départ inutile, elle est devenue cette année réellement problématique. Le débat du consortium en anglais a donné lieu à une scène abracadabrante. L’animatrice prend position, donne son opinion biaisée sur des lois de l’Assemblée nationale du Québec. »

<https://www.journaldemontreal.com/2021/09/25/la-commission-aux-debats-a-failli-a-sa-tache>

(Journal de Montréal, Sept 25, 2021)

Appendix 5 – Participation Criteria for the Leaders’ Debates

Participation Criteria for the Leaders’ Debates for the 44th General Election

I. Introduction

The Leaders' Debates Commission ("the Commission") is mandated with setting the participation criteria for the leaders' debates and ensuring that the leader of each political party that meets those criteria is invited to participate in the debates.

After consultation with registered political parties, stakeholders, the public and a review of the historical selection criteria, the Commission has decided on the participation criteria that it will employ to invite leaders to the next general election leaders' debates.

This document sets the participation criteria established by the Commission for the leaders' debates and the Commission's rationale for the criteria.

In order to be invited by the Commission to participate in the leaders' debates, a leader of a political party must meet one of the following criteria:

(i): on the date the general election is called, the party is represented in the House of Commons by a Member of Parliament who was elected as a member of that party; or

(ii): the party's candidates for the most recent general election received at that election at least 4% of the number of valid votes cast; or

(iii): five days after the date the general election is called, the party receives a level of national support of at least 4%, determined by voting intention, and as measured by leading national public opinion polling organizations, using the average of those organizations' most recently publicly-reported results.

II. The Task and Terms of Reference

The Commission is mandated to organize two debates (one in French and one in English) for the next federal general election.

As part of its mandate, the Commission is tasked with selecting the party leaders who will be invited to participate in these debates, as set out in Order in Council P.C. 2018-1322, dated October 29, 2018, as amended by Order in Council P.C. 2020-871, dated November 5, 2020 ("OIC").

The relevant parts of the OIC that inform the Commission's mandate state as follows:

Whereas it is desirable that leaders' debates be effective, informative and compelling and benefit from the participation of the leaders who have the greatest likelihood of becoming Prime Minister or whose political parties have the greatest likelihood of winning seats in Parliament;

Whereas it is desirable that leaders' debates be organized using clear, open and transparent participation criteria;

[...]

The mandate of the Leaders' Debates Commission is to:

...

(b) set participation criteria for the leaders' debates and ensure that the leader of each political party that meets those criteria is invited to participate in the debates;

(b.1) make the participation criteria public

(i) for a general election held in accordance with subsection 56.1(2) of the Canada Elections Act, no later than June 30 before the day set by that subsection; or

(ii) for a general election not held in accordance with subsection 56.1(2) of the Canada Elections Act, no later than seven days after the issue of the writs.

The Commission has undertaken this task by considering: (1) the historical application of debate participation criteria in past Canadian elections; (2) the 2019 Participation Criteria; and (3) the existing public policy documents on the participation criteria and submissions from stakeholders, including the leaders of all registered political parties, the media and the public.

As a result of this process, the Commission has developed principles to guide the Commission's creation of the participation criteria.

III. Context and Considerations

A. Historical application of debate participation criteria in past Canadian elections

Since 1968, televised leaders' debates in Canada have been organized by a range of entities. For all election campaigns since then, there has been a relatively consistent set of participation criteria that have been applied to determine which political party leaders would be invited to participate in the debates. However, as noted by the 1992 Royal Commission on Electoral Reform and Party Financing (the "Lortie Commission"), agreement on these criteria and other matters has been "difficult to achieve" at every election.

One summary of the participation criteria that has historically been used to select which leaders would participate in the debates was produced in 2016 by the Institute for Research on Public Policy and Carleton University report, entitled [The Future of Leaders' Debates in Canadian Federal Elections](#), following a 2015 colloquium that brought together stakeholders and academics. The report examined the criteria established by the broadcast consortium that produced the 2015 leaders' debates. According to the report, to be invited in the 2015 debate, parties:

Had to have elected Members of Parliament (MPs) in the House of Commons;

Intended to run candidates in all or nearly all constituencies;

Had to have a chance of winning seats (as evidenced by polling history, previous results);

Had to have a presence in daily political conversation;

Had to have a fully developed platform;

Had to consider the language proficiency of each leader for debates in that language; and

Had to have an identified party leader.

These criteria, which the report characterizes as "broadly appropriate (but must include some provision for exceptional circumstances)", required that a political party had both proven electoral success in a previous election and a likelihood of electoral success in the election at hand. The Commission also notes that these criteria contained both objective and subjective elements.

B. The 2019 Participation Criteria

In 2018, the Government of Canada [announced](#) the creation of the Leaders' Debates Commission to organize leaders' debates in order to "make the debates a more predictable, reliable and stable element of federal election campaigns". For the 2019 election, the Commission was tasked with selecting the party leaders who would be invited to participate in the debates that it organized. This invitation was based on the application of participation criteria set out in OIC P.C. 2018-1322. While the 2019 criteria bear similarity to the criteria employed by the 2015 consortium, they were less onerous in that they did not demand past electoral success. The 2019 criteria also included both objective and subjective elements. In other words, for one criterion, reasonable actors could come to different conclusions about whether certain political parties would or would not meet that criterion.

Following consultations, the Commission issued its [interpretation](#) of the 2019 criteria contained in OIC P.C. 2018-1322 and concluded:

"that the application of the mandated participation criteria contains both objective and subjective elements.

While the OIC sets out what appears to be three criteria to be interpreted and applied, these can in fact be divided as follows:

Criterion (i): the party is represented in the House of Commons by a Member of Parliament who was elected as a member of that party;

Criterion (ii): the Commissioner considers that the party intends to endorse candidates in at least 90% of electoral districts in the general election in question;

Criterion (iii):

a. the party's candidates for the most recent general election received at that election at least 4% of the number of valid votes cast; or,

b. based on the recent political context, public opinion polls and previous general election results, the Commissioner considers that candidates endorsed by the party have a legitimate chance to be elected in the general election in question."

The Commission noted that while criteria (i) and (iii)(a) did not require an extensive assessment because they were based on the review of objective evidence, criteria (ii) and especially (iii)(b), on the other hand, required further assessment.

As a result, with respect to criterion (iii)(b), the Commission decided that it would consider a range of factors in order to determine "recent political context, public opinion polls and previous general results", namely:

Evidence provided by the political party in question in relation to the criterion;

Both current standing and trends in national public opinion polls;

Riding level polls, both publicly-available and internal party polls if provided as evidence by the party and riding projections;

Information received from experts and political organizations regarding information about particular ridings;

Parties and candidates' performances in previous elections;

Media presence and visibility of the party and/or its leader nation-wide;

Whether a party is responsive to or represents a contemporary political trend or movement;

Federal by-election results that took place since the last general election;

Party membership; and

Party fundraising.

Ultimately, in its interpretation of criterion (iii)(b), the Commission concluded that its primary consideration on whether to invite a particular party leader would be based on assessing the reasonable chance of more than one candidate of that party being elected.

When the Commission applied the 2019 criteria, the application of the criteria was straightforward in the case of five of the political parties. None of these five invitations required the Commission to interpret or apply criterion (iii)(b).

As a result, the Commission invited these parties' leaders on August 12, 2019, almost two months before the debates, to participate in the debates.

However, determining whether to invite a sixth political party, the People's Party of Canada ("PPC"), required further assessment. Rather than inviting the leader of the PPC in August alongside the other five leaders, the Commission sought additional and more current information, including from the PPC and from public opinion polling, before making a determination of whether more than one candidate endorsed by the PPC had a legitimate chance of being elected. In particular, the Commission asked the PPC to submit a list of three to five ridings that it believed most likely to elect a PPC candidate. Ultimately, the Commission concluded that the PPC had more than one candidate with a legitimate chance to be elected. This decision was informed by public opinion polling that indicated that more than 25% of respondents indicated a willingness to consider voting for the PPC in several electoral districts. As a result, the Commission invited the leader of the PPC to participate in the debates on September 16, 2019.

Following the 2019 election, the Commission contracted Nanos Research to undertake an examination of the Commission's interpretation of the participation criteria laid out in the OIC. Nanos Research's report, "[Examination of the Standard for Debate Inclusion](#)" observed that "on election day, the People's Party was only competitive (finishing 2nd) in one riding (Beauce). In fact, its presence in all [ridings analyzed by the Commission] did not even impact who won as the winning candidate in each riding won

by more than the PPC vote share." The vote share in these five ridings ranged from 2.0% to 5.2%. Nationally, the PPC obtained 1.6% of the vote and no seats in the House of Commons.

C. Public Policy Documents, Consultations and Input Reviewed by the Commission

In order to determine the participation criteria for the next general election, the Commission undertook a review of a range of consultations on the subject of debate participation criteria in Canada. The Commission reviewed a number of reports by think tanks, the Government of Canada, the Parliament of Canada, and the Commission itself.

The Commission reviewed earlier consultations undertaken by the Commission before and after the 2019 general election. The Commission also undertook new consultations in consideration of the current mandate. These new consultations notably included seeking views from all registered and eligible political parties and the public. As part of its consultation process, the Commission advised that it intended to consider the following documents and sought any submissions in their regard:

Consultations undertaken in 2020-21 under the Commission's updated mandate;

The Commission's report to Parliament: [Democracy Matters, Debates Count: A report on the 2019 Leaders' Debates Commission and the future of debates in Canada](#);

Consultations previously undertaken either in the lead-up to or the aftermath of the 2019 election and debates, including previous submissions received from political parties and other stakeholders that are summarized in the Commission's report to Parliament;

The Commission's previous [interpretation](#) of OIC P.C. 2018-1322;

Evidence from past election results and public opinion polling;

The House of Commons Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs report, ["The Creation of an Independent Commissioner Responsible for Leaders' Debates"](#);

The Institute of Research on Public Policy's report, ["Creating an Independent Commission for Federal Leaders' Debates"](#), which summarizes recommendations made by experts and stakeholders on how best to proceed with a debates commission;

The Government of Canada's 2018 [online consultation on political party leaders' debates](#); and the historical application of debate participation criteria in past Canadian elections.

The Commission received submissions from the public, as well as from the Bloc Québécois, the Christian Heritage Party of Canada, the Conservative Party of Canada, the Green Party of Canada, the Liberal Party of Canada, the Marijuana Party, the Marxist-Leninist Party of Canada, the New Democratic Party, the Parti Rhinocéros Party, and the People's Party of Canada.

A review of all of these submissions revealed the following themes:

There is no consensus on specific participation criteria. However, except for some smaller political parties, there is near unanimous support to establish criteria that would include some registered political parties and exclude others. From the submissions received, the Commission found that almost no one supported the proposition that all registered political parties should be on stage for televised leaders' debates;

Certain interested stakeholders, such as the media and political parties, have specific views on where the threshold should be set on how many leaders should be on stage. Some submissions from the media suggest debates should include only those leaders most likely to become Prime Minister. Without exception, political party input suggested the Commission should set criteria that would assure the inclusion of their own party;

The consensus among those who do not belong to the media or a political party is that the Commission should aim to be inclusive rather than exclusive with the goal of inviting leaders likely to be an important part of public policymaking. In other words, the choice of which leaders should be invited should focus on potential representation in Parliament and not on who is most likely to be elected Prime Minister. In this regard, the Commission received submissions that Canada does not have a presidential system but rather a parliamentary system, and the leaders' debates should therefore feature leaders of political parties that are likely to be an important part of public policymaking by winning seats in Parliament;

To the greatest extent possible, debate participation criteria set by the Commission should be simple, transparent, and objective. The "debate about the debates", which is to say the discussion that has occurred in many past elections about who is invited to participate in leaders' debates and why, does little to inform voters about political parties and their policies. It also risks alienating voters or increasing distrust in democratic institutions when participation decisions are made behind closed doors;

The use of public participation criteria in 2019 was viewed as a step forward for debate organization, but one whose benefits were not fully realized because some of the criteria were subjective and open to interpretation;

Results from the previous election are one of the most important determinants of whether a political party's leader should be invited to participate in debates in the following general election. There is a consensus that having an MP elected under a party's banner confers upon that party the status of having a meaningful presence in daily political conversation and policy making in Parliament;

The Commission also received the views that it is possible for a party to obtain a meaningful number of votes from Canadians but not elect an MP as a result of Canada's first past the post electoral system, and that debate participation criteria should take this into account by not excluding a leader whose party did not get any seats. The Commission noted input provided that when a party is potentially excluded from debates based on previous election results, the Commission should not only look at the number of seats won or lost by the political party during that previous election but also consider the number of votes received by the party;

Debate participation criteria should not exclusively require past electoral success; instead, the criteria must allow for the possibility of the emergence of new political parties. There is a consensus that public opinion polls that measure voter intention close to the debates could serve to measure whether a political party that did not have electoral success in the previous election has a significant presence in political conversation and a reasonable likelihood to contribute materially to public policymaking by winning seats in the next Parliament; and

Canada has a history of both national and regional political parties, and debate participation criteria should aim to take both into account.

IV. Discussion and analysis

A. Guiding Principles

The Commission has developed a series of guiding principles to decide on the participation criteria for the debates. These principles are drawn from the historical application of debate participation criteria in Canada, the general themes emerging from consultations and input reviewed, and by the OIC, including the following provisions:

Preamble: "it is desirable that leaders' debates be effective, informative and compelling and benefit from the participation of the leaders who have the greatest likelihood of becoming Prime Minister or whose political parties have the greatest likelihood of winning seats in Parliament";

Preamble: "it is desirable that leaders' debates be organized using clear, open and transparent participation criteria";

Section 3(d): "the decisions regarding the organization of the leaders' debates, including those respecting participation criteria, are made publicly available in a timely manner"; and

Section 4: "the Leaders' Debates Commission is to be guided by the pursuit of the public interest and by the principles of independence, impartiality, credibility, democratic citizenship, civic education, inclusion and cost-effectiveness."

Distilling these guiding principles we conclude that the criteria should, to the greatest extent possible:

be simple;

be clear;

be objective; and

allow for the participation of leaders of political parties that have the greatest likelihood of winning seats in the House of Commons.

B. Impact of Participation Criteria: Commission's Objective

The Commission acknowledges its decision in setting the participation criteria may engage the rights to freedom of expression and the right to vote protected under the Canadian *Charter of Rights and Freedoms*. When determining the participation criteria, the Commission is guided by its objectives set out in the OIC and how the *Charter* values at issue will best be protected in view of its objectives.

First, the Commission considers that, for both the leaders of the political parties and for voters, the *Charter* rights of freedom of expression and the right to vote are engaged in its determination of the participation criteria. Freedom of expression protects not only the individual who speaks the message, but also the recipient. If political parties are excluded, their freedom of expression is engaged. The right of voters as recipients of their message and a right to effectively be informed through the debates is also engaged.

Second, the Commission's mandate, as set out in the OIC, is to design debates that are "effective, informative, and compelling and benefit from the participation of the leaders who have the greatest likelihood of becoming Prime Minister or whose political parties have the greatest likelihood of winning seats in Parliament."

The Commission interprets this mandate to have two related parts: (a) the Commission is limited to inviting leaders of political parties who have the greatest likelihood of winning seats in Parliament or whose leader has the greatest likelihood of becoming Prime Minister; and (b) the Commission must design debates that are effective, informative, and compelling to assist the voters in making an informed decision about how to vote.

On the first part, the objective inherently is inconsistent with including all political parties in the leaders' debates. Not all parties have the same likelihood of winning seats in Parliament. The Commission must decide how it will determine the likelihood of winning seats in Parliament and at what level to set that threshold.

On the second part, the Commission is concerned with ensuring that the debates are effective at informing voters. As the Lortie Commission points out, debates "attract large audiences. They stimulate interest in politics, help voters determine the basic issues of the campaign, increase awareness of parties and leaders, and help to legitimize political institutions."

The issue for the Leaders' Debates Commission is how to set the threshold or limit on participation that best fulfils the mandate to ensure that Canadians are informed about the political parties that are most likely to be elected and therefore contribute to public policy debate in the House of Commons while at the same time ensuring that the Charter values at issue of both the voters and the leaders are protected.

The Commission returns to its analysis of this balancing in its rationale below.

C. Relevant Factors

From its consultation and review process, the Commission has identified the following two factors as relevant to identifying political parties that may be eligible to participate in the leaders' debates:

Historical record of political party support: should indicators of a political party's history, such as its past election results, be a criterion; if so, what is the appropriate threshold and what evidence should be used; and

Current and future information on political party support: should indicators of a political party's popularity and relevance, and its potential for future electoral support by winning seats in the House of Commons, be a criterion; if so, what is the appropriate threshold and what evidence should be used.

Based on the Commissions' review of the above consultations and reports and its own expertise, the Commission is of the view that both #1 and #2 are relevant and concludes that debate participation criteria should be established to measure both a political party's historical record and its level of current and future electoral support. This conclusion is based on the Commission's agreement with the views expressed in the consultations and the reports that both (a) and (b) can be used to assess whether a political party is likely to play an important part in policymaking by winning seats in the House of Commons. Furthermore, such an approach is consistent with the historical application of debate participation criteria in Canada.

The Commission has considered whether a political party should be required to demonstrate that it meets the criteria for both of these elements, or just one or the other. In previous elections, it had frequently been a requirement for a political party to have both a historical record and indications of

current or future support. The criteria provided to the Commission in 2019 made no such requirement and allowed for the participation of a party leader who only met one or the other. The Commission concludes that political parties should only be required to meet the criteria for one or the other, and not both. This enables, on the one hand, the potential participation of a newly emerging political party that may be unable to meet criteria based on a historical record, and on the other the participation of a political party with a demonstrated historical record.

Having decided that both the historical record and current support are important in considering whether to invite a leader of a political party to the leaders' debates, the Commission's task is next to decide how each of these criteria will be applied.

1. Historical Record

A debate participation criterion that assesses a political party's historical record must account for the consensus view that past electoral success confers relevance onto a political party, such that the leader of such a party is expected to participate in leaders' debates in the next election.

The Commission considered what factors it should use to assess a political party's historical record, including its historical longevity, the number of candidates fielded in previous elections, and its record of electoral success. With regards to both historical longevity and past number of candidates, however, an analysis of both of these factors in past elections indicates that a political party can have a long history and a large number of candidates without electing a Member of Parliament and thus may not be contributing to policymaking in the House of Commons. The Commission concludes that these criteria are therefore not appropriate. Conversely, the Commission concludes that the best measure of a political party's historical record is its record of electoral success.

The Commission is therefore of the view that one criterion to assess historical record should look at whether a party has elected one or more Members of Parliament (MP) under its banner on the date an election is called. In terms of the threshold of number of MPs, the Commission has concluded that a threshold of one MP is sufficient. This is past accepted practice, and it is the minimum threshold that can be applied in terms of seats won and is appropriate at this level. In coming to this conclusion, the Commission also considered that the election of one MP under a party's banner is a criterion that can apply to both national and regional parties.

The Commission is also of the view that a political party's historical record should be recognized if it can demonstrate a degree of electoral success even if that does not translate into the election of an MP under its banner. As such, the Commission has adopted a threshold of 4% of valid votes cast in the previous election. The 4% threshold is for the following reasons. The first is that this is consistent with past practice: the Commission applied this same metric in 2019. Second, the Commission looked at how past election outcomes informed the decision of previous debate organizers to invite leaders in the debates and how those decisions were received by the Canadian public. In particular, the Commission considered that the decisions to invite or not the Green Party in the period of 2006 to 2011 were informative and relevant to its analysis. The leader of this party was invited to participate in the 2008 consortium debate, having received 4.5% of valid votes cast in 2006 and having an MP in Parliament at the time the election was called (but who was not elected under the party's banner), but the leader did not receive an invitation in 2011 despite the party receiving 6.8 percent of valid votes cast in 2008. The consortium received considerable criticism from the public for the exclusion of the leader of the Green

Party of Canada for these 2011 debates, demonstrating that the decision to include them in 2008 more closely aligned with Canadians' expectations for debate participation. From this, the Commission draws the inference that Canadians thought that at that level of popular support, the Green Party of Canada had a reasonable likelihood of contributing to public policy debate by winning seats in Parliament and therefore their leader should be included in the leaders' debates.

Lastly, the Commission received input from a political party that argued that admission to future debates for a newly emerging political party should not be as difficult as it has been for political parties in the past. The Commission agrees with this submission and concludes that it is not a requirement that a political party must have an elected MP in order to be invited to the leaders' debates if it is otherwise able to demonstrate electoral support as discussed below.

2. Current and future information on political party support

The Commission agrees with the consensus that emerged from the consultations that the participation criteria should allow for the emergence of new political parties and the participation of their leaders in the debates.

The Commission considered how the emergence of new political parties and the participation of their leaders was accommodated in the 2019 criteria. In 2019, the criteria allowed the Commission to consider "recent political context" and "legitimate chance" for candidates to be elected, as detailed above. The Commission was not satisfied with these indicia. In its report to Parliament following the 2019 election, the Commission concluded:

Each of these items provided a possibility for observers to arrive at different conclusions as to whether a party did or did not meet the stated criterion. The Commission considered a range of evidence to support the conclusions it reached in interpreting the criteria as provided. Nevertheless, this level of interpretation, coupled with the need to collect evidence on electability, did not lead to a process that was completely satisfactory.

The Commission has therefore undertaken to set participation criteria for current and future levels of support that are as simple, clear and objective as possible.

To do so, the Commission concludes that relying upon public opinion polling measuring voting intention five days after the date the general election is called is an appropriate metric. The Commission concludes that this timeframe is appropriate because it is simple and clear, in alignment with the OIC and the Commission's guiding principles. It also balances the need for the Commission to have access to the most up to date evidence available in order to assess whether political parties satisfy the debate participation criteria; and the need to ensure that both the debates producer has sufficient time to produce a debate of high quality, as required by the OIC, and that the political parties can properly prepare for the debates in order to ensure they are informative for Canadians.

Much of the input received by the Commission identified 4 to 5 percent as an appropriate threshold, for a number of reasons. First, based on [analysis](#) conducted as part of the Commission's 2019 report to Parliament, "vote shares below five percent nationally are unlikely to generate seats." Second, this voting intention threshold closely correlates with the four percent of votes received in one of the criteria outlined in the historical record (criterion ii). The Commission considered that setting a higher threshold for voting intention, such as 5% in polls, might account for the fact that not all support indicated in a poll

translates into actual votes. The Commission has concluded however that in an effort to establish a level playing field between established and emerging political parties, the threshold for voting intention should match the threshold set for the historical record. The Commission has also concluded, based on the historical electoral record that establishing a threshold of 4 percent voting intention nationally would capture the voting intention of a significant emerging regional political party, thereby allowing its leader to qualify.

Both of these reasons consider electoral outcomes as the motivating factor behind the criterion, but this is not the only factor that the Commission heard through its consultations. Rather, some stakeholders expressed the view that a 4 to 5 percent threshold indicates that the party and its leader have a meaningful presence in daily political conversation at the time. The Commission concludes that parties whose leaders have this presence have a reasonable likelihood of contributing to public policy debate by winning seats in the House of Commons.

In response to the Commission's request for submissions, some political parties identified other metrics for setting the debate participation criteria. In particular, it was suggested that the Commission should establish a criterion that sets a threshold on the number of candidates endorsed by a party; if a party endorses more than 170 candidates, for example, this would qualify that party for inclusion in the debate. However, the Commission's view, this metric is insufficient on its own to demonstrate that a political party is likely to be an important part of public policymaking by winning seats. For example, a review of the electoral record demonstrates that there can be political parties that field more than 170 candidates who do not succeed in obtaining more than 2 percent of the vote and do not win any seats in Parliament. The Commission concludes that this metric measures the relative capacity of a party to organize and field candidates, but these metrics do not translate into measuring whether a party is likely to be an important part of public policymaking by winning seats.

D. Impact of Participation Criteria: Proportionality Exercise

The Commission acknowledges that its criteria will exclude some political leaders from the debates. However, the Commission could not include the leaders of all of the political leaders without causing a deleterious impact on its statutory objective of delivering informative and effective debates that benefit from the participation of leaders whose political parties have the greatest likelihood of participating in public policy debate in the House of Commons by winning seats.

The Commission considered evidence that the exclusion of minor political parties enhances the effectiveness, appeal and informative nature of debates. The Lortie Commission emphasized the importance of balancing "claims of fairness with the practicalities of organizing effective, appealing and informative debates, as well as the right of voters to have the information to make a clear choice among those who have a chance of forming the government." The Lortie Commission noted submissions that expressed concern that too many participants reduces the utility and appeal of the debate to the voting public. The Leaders' Debates Commission agrees with these concerns.

The Commission also considered that major political parties may choose not to participate in a debate which features a dozen or more participants, most of whom may have little opportunity for electoral success. Such a result would undermine one of the primary purposes of the leaders' debates which is to have the leaders of the political parties who are most likely to become Prime Minister be present.

At the same time, as discussed above, the Commission chose criteria that set a minimal threshold that would not be overly onerous to meet for emerging political parties. This ensures that political parties that have the potential to have a voice in Parliament are at the leaders' debates, so that voters are able to consider their platform and contrast it with those of other political parties in making an informed decision.

Lastly, the Commission has considered a suggestion that it should organize a second-tier debate for other political parties that are not invited to a first tier leaders' debate.^{Footnote 1} The Commission's mandate, as set out in the Order in Council, is to "organize one leaders' debate in each official language during each general election period" and as such it cannot acquiesce to this suggestion and organize a third (or fourth) debate.

V. Conclusion

In order to be invited to participate in the leaders' debates, a leader of a political party must meet one of the following criteria:

(i): on the date the general election is called, the party is represented in the House of Commons by a Member of Parliament who was elected as a member of that party; or

(ii): the party's candidates for the most recent general election received at that election at least 4% of the number of valid votes cast; or

(iii): five days after the date the general election is called, the party receives a level of national support of at least 4%, determined by voting intention, and as measured by leading national public opinion polling organizations, using the average of those organizations' most recently publicly-reported results.

With regards to criteria (iii), the Commission will select public opinion polls based on the quality of the methodology employed, the reputation of the polling organizations, and the frequency and timeliness of the polling conducted. The Commission may take professional advice to assist in selecting the leading national public opinion polls to be used in applying the criterion and will identify the selected polling organizations at the time the criterion is applied.

When examined together, the Commission concludes that inviting leaders of parties that meet one of these three criteria will ensure the participation of those leaders likely to be an important part of public policymaking in Canada by winning seats in Parliament. The criteria are simple, clear, and objective, and balance the perspective of looking at real electoral success and the possibility of future success.

These criteria are informed by Canada's system of government, the country's history with leaders' debates, and by consultations on who should participate in Commission-led debates.

VI. Decision-making Timeline and Next Steps

The Commission will make its decision with respect to which political parties meet the debate participation criteria no later than six days after the date the election is called. The Commission will then issue invitations to leaders of those political parties that meet debate participation criteria. A party not invited will have an opportunity to ask the Commission to reconsider within two days of the invitation to leaders. The Commission will make its final decision with respect to any such party within three days of that party's application for review. The tight timelines are being set to ensure that both the debates

producer has sufficient time to produce a debate of high quality, as required by the OIC, and that the political parties can properly prepare for the debates in order to ensure they are informative for Canadians.

Footnote

Footnote 1

The Commission notes that section 3(i) of the OIC provides that part of the Commission's role is to "provide advice and support in respect of other political debates related to the general election, including candidates' debates, as the Debates Commissioner considers appropriate." The Commission does not interpret this role to include the organizing of separate debates in addition to the two it is mandated to organize.

Participation Criterion (iii) Approach for the Leaders' Debates for the 44th General Election

I. Introduction

On June 22, 2021, the Leaders' Debates Commission ("the Commission") [set the participation criteria](#) for the next federal leaders' debates in accordance with the Commission's amended mandate.

In order to qualify under criterion (iii) a leader of a political party must meet the following:

"five days after the date the general election is called, the party receives a level of national support of at least 4%, determined by voting intention, and as measured by leading national public opinion polling organizations, using the average of those organizations' most recently publicly-reported results."

The Commission has decided how it will apply criterion (iii), and this document provides the rationale for these determinations. The Commission is driven by its guiding principles for debate participation criteria, and in particular that they be simple, clear, and objective.

The Commission made these decisions following its request for and receipt of advice from the academics organizing the Canadian Elections Study. Convened by Professor Peter Loewen, the experts in this Polling Advisory Group are André Blais, Claire Durand, Allison Harell, Richard Johnston, Daniel Rubenson, and Laura Stephenson, in addition to Dr. Loewen.

In making its determination for a political party under criterion (iii), the Commission will select polls that:

were completed and released in the window from 9 days before to 5 days after the issuance of the writs;

were conducted by public opinion polling organizations that are either members of the Canadian Research Insights Council or are providing public opinion data to major media organizations, using the polling organizations' most recent publicly-reported result;

report explicit information about the support level for the party;

were conducted on a nationally representative sample of at least 1,000 respondents; and

publicly release methodological information sufficient for verification of the integrity of the poll, including question wording for the vote choice question(s), fielding dates, and details on sample size, weighting criteria, and survey mode.

The Commission will not consider internal party polling or polls commissioned by a political party.

In order to average the selected polls and determine a party's level of support, the polls will be averaged using a simple mean for each party included in at least two polls.

The Commission will make its decision with respect to which political parties meet the debate participation criteria no later than six days after the date the election is called.

The Commission's rationale for these determinations, as well as the advice received from the Polling Advisory Group, is provided below.

II. Criterion (iii)

In order to qualify under criterion (iii) a leader of a political party must meet the following:

"five days after the date the general election is called, the party receives a level of national support of at least 4%, determined by voting intention, and as measured by leading national public opinion polling organizations, using the average of those organizations' most recently publicly-reported results."

In its [June 22, 2021 decision setting the participation criteria](#), the Commission stated that it would select public opinion polls based on the quality of the methodology employed, the reputation of the polling organizations, and the frequency and timeliness of the polling conducted.

The Commission also stated it may consider professional advice to assist the Commission in how to select the leading national public opinion polls to be used in applying the criterion.

To this end, the Commission sought the advice of the academics organizing the Canadian Elections Study (CES), a university research project initiated in 1965 to examine various aspects of federal elections. The Commission's initial point of contact was Professor Peter Loewen, who in addition to co-leading the CES study for the 44th General Election, is a professor in the Department of Political Science and the Munk School of Global Affairs and Public Policy; Associate Director, Global Engagement at the Munk School; and Director of PEARL (Policy, Elections, & Representation Lab).

Dr. Loewen then convened a group of academics to provide advice to the Commission on the application of criterion (iii). The academics convened in this Polling Advisory Group are Peter Loewen, André Blais, Claire Durand, Allison Harell, Richard Johnston, Daniel Rubenson, and Laura Stephenson. Each of these academics is an expert in the field.

The Commission asked the Polling Advisory Group to provide advice to the Commission in order to make a determination under criterion (iii). In particular, the Commission asked the Polling Advisory Group to provide its advice on the following:

The timeframe during which to consider polling results;

Which national public opinion polling organizations to select; and

How to average the polling organizations most recently publicly-reported results.

The Commission received a submission from the Polling Advisory Group, included in full in Annex A. The Commission also obtained an absence of conflict declaration from each member of the group.

The group's recommendations for each of the three items, and the Commission's resulting analysis and conclusions will be considered in turn.

In its consideration of each of these elements, the Commission is driven by its guiding principles for debate participation criteria, and in particular that they be simple, clear, and objective.

Timeframe

The Polling Advisory Group recommended that polls be included provided that the poll fieldwork "be completed in the window from 9 days before to 5 days after the drawing of the writ." This amounts to a timeframe of 14 days in which to consider polling results. The Polling Advisory Group further explained that this timeframe contributes to the generation of the "largest possible number of polls."

The Commission has stated that it will consider the timeliness of the polling conducted. The Commission is satisfied that the recommendation of the Polling Advisory Group achieves this objective. The Commission concludes that a timeframe of 14 days is reasonable because it will provide the Commission with access to as broad a range of polls as possible for the application of criterion (iii), while still ensuring that the polls used remain in close proximity to the date of determination.

The Commission also examined the historical record by reviewing polls in past elections in the period five days after and nine days before the issuance of the writs. Voting intentions for parties did not frequently show significant movement during this time period.

Some public opinion polling organizations may release multiple polls issued during this period; in these instances, criterion (iii) states that the Commission will consider the organizations' most recent publicly-reported result.

Selection of national public opinion polling organizations

The Polling Advisory Group recommended that, in applying criterion (iii), the Commission select polls that:

- a) are conducted by public opinion polling organizations that are either members of the Canadian Research Insights Council (CRIC) or are providing public opinion data to major media organizations;
- b) report explicit information about the support level for the party;
- c) were conducted on a nationally representative sample of at least 1,000 respondents; and
- d) publicly release methodological information sufficient for verification of the integrity of the poll, which would include question wording for the vote choice question(s), fielding dates, and details on sample size, weighting criteria, and survey mode.

The Polling Advisory Group's rationale for these criteria states that, in their view, they satisfy "the guiding values articulated by the Commissioner" in that they are "clear and simple" while still requiring polls to pass a "credibility test."

The Commission has stated that it would select public opinion polls based on the quality of the methodology employed and the reputation of the polling organizations. The Commission is satisfied that the recommendation of the Polling Advisory Group takes this position into consideration.

In considering the recommendation made by the Polling Advisory Group, the Commission has reviewed CRIC's Public Opinion Research Standards and Disclosure Requirements that its members are required to follow. Its objectives are:

To support sound and ethical practices in the disclosure of research;

To ensure research is unbiased and supports decision-making in the public, private and not-for-profit sectors;

To enhance public trust and improve the public's understanding of the use of research; and

To ensure the appropriate transparency and disclosure of research results and methods of studies.

The Commission concludes that CRIC's requirements of its members align with the Commission's mandate and its guiding principles for setting participation criteria, and that therefore polls conducted by CRIC members within the 14-day timeframe are appropriate for inclusion in a determination of average voting intention.

The Commission recognizes that CRIC does not represent the entirety of the Canadian public opinion polling industry. However, the Commission agrees with the Polling Advisory Group that CRIC's membership includes a significant proportion of Canada's national public opinion organizations.

The Commission also agrees with the Polling Advisory Group's recommendation to supplement the pool of available polls by including those organizations who have been contracted by the major Canadian media organizations for the purposes of conducting polls to measure Canadians' voting intentions, as long as these polls satisfy methodological and disclosure requirements. This ensures that CRIC membership is not a necessary condition for inclusion in the Commission's decision-making process while maintaining a focus on the reputation and methodology of the organizations to be considered.

The Commission also concludes that it will not consider internal party polling, as recommended by the Polling Advisory Group, because internal party polling would not satisfy the above requirements that polls be publicly reported and undertaken by a CRIC member or a major news organization. The Commission also will not consider polling commissioned by a political party in order to ensure that the data available for the Commission's consideration is objective.

The Commission agrees with the Polling Advisory Group's recommendation that the measurement of a political party's level of support shall be done using polls where that party receives an explicit level of support. This means that respondents directly indicate their intention to vote for that party.

The Commission assessed this recommendation in light of two related considerations. First, not all polls will provide the option to respondents to indicate support for all political parties. Second, some polls will provide respondents with the option to select "Other" as their voting intention, after a subset of the full list of registered and eligible political parties is presented as a choice. While it may be argued that these two considerations mean that the Commission does not have a complete picture of voting intention for

each political party, the Commission concludes that there are several factors that weigh against this argument. The Commission explains these factors in the following paragraphs.

The Commission is of the view that public opinion polling organizations have a professional and reputational interest in presenting to respondents as options those parties that have a meaningful presence in daily political conversation at the time. This means that it is likely that parties that would measure 4% or higher in voting intention are presented as options in their polls.

The Commission further notes that some current polls present respondents with the option to select political parties that have historically registered much less than 4% in past electoral results. Some polls also allow respondents to select newly emerging political parties and/or change the list of available responses over time. All of this evidence indicates that national public opinion polling organizations are likely to present respondents with the opportunity to indicate explicit support for parties that are likely to receive a measured voting intention of 4% or higher.

With regards to polls that have responses for "Other" parties, the Commission concludes that it is not in keeping with the guiding principles to undertake any method that would attempt to assign these voting intentions to particular political parties or to otherwise infer what respondents wished to indicate with a "Other" response. The Commission therefore concludes that adopting the approach of requiring an explicit level of support is reasonable and ensures the criteria and their application are simple, clear, and objective.

The Commission asked the Polling Advisory Group to consider whether a minimum sample size for polls should be considered, and the Commission agrees with the Polling Advisory Group's recommendation to only include those polls that have a sample size of 1,000 or greater. The Commission has reviewed the recent history of polls undertaken in Canada and notes that almost all polls conducted by leading national public opinion polling organizations use a sample size of 1,000 or more, and so it is unlikely that credible polls will be excluded as a result of this requirement. Polls with a sample size less than 1,000 are likely to have a greater margin of error and may not be comparable to polls with more respondents, and as a result establishing a minimum size of 1,000 will allow for a better comparison amongst the polls selected to determine the average.

The Commission also asked the Polling Advisory Group to provide expert advice on how to assess the credibility of all potential polls that could be used by the Commission. The Polling Advisory Group recommended to the Commission that it provide this expert advice in two parts.

In order to be clear prior to the issuance of the writs on what the Commission will be looking for, the group recommended that polls be included so as long as its release "is accompanied by the following publicly accessible information: exact wording on questions about vote intention; dates of fieldwork, sample size; weighting criteria, if any; and survey mode." The group also recommended that it provide advice to the Commission after the election is called explaining "the inclusion or exclusion of an individual firms' results" by assessing each poll against the pre-identified requirements.

The Commission is satisfied that the Polling Advisory Group's recommendations on the specific components required of each poll to be included in the Commission's analysis, in terms of method, transparency, and disclosure, will help ensure a credible process that aligns with the Commission's guiding principles.

The Commission recognizes that a fully predictable process would seek to name the specific polling organizations to be used in advance of the issuance of the writs but has concluded that in a minority context with an unknown election call date; such an approach may limit the polls available for use by the Commission. The Commission concludes that the two-step process recommended by the Polling Advisory Group, which first identifies ahead of time the requirements for a poll to be included and then after the issuance of the writs provide specific advice assessing each potential poll against these requirements meets the Commission's guiding principles.

The Commission also considered a submission it received from The Conservative Party of Canada stating that the Commission, when making its determination for criterion (iii), should exclude polls from entities that have previously demonstrated a bias or animus towards a federally-registered political party. The Conservative Party of Canada submitted that such a bias exists towards them by EKOS Research Associates.

The Commission has considered this submission in its decision-making process. The Commission also provided this information to Dr. Loewen to ensure that the Polling Advisory Group's recommendations on a proposed methodology for applying criterion (iii) took this submission into consideration.

The Polling Advisory Group's submission recommends that polls be included subject to a number of factors discussed above which assess that poll based on organizational reputation, methodological soundness, and transparency and disclosure standards. The Commission agrees with the rationale of the group and concludes that the Commission's selection of national public opinion polling organizations will be based on these factors. No polling organizations will be excluded on the grounds that, in the view of one or more political party, they have previously demonstrated a bias towards a political party.

Averaging the selected polls

The Polling Advisory Group has recommended that, for each political party included in at least two polls, the mean value of that party's level of support as measured by voting intention will be determined using a simple mean across the polls in which it receives an explicit level of support.

The Commission has stated it will use an average of polls in order to make its determination of whether a party receives a level of national support of at least 4%, determined by voting intention. The Commission has considered the Polling Advisory Group's recommendations for how to determine the average of the selected polls. In so doing, the Commission is aware that there are differences amongst the methodologies and sample sizes of the above polls; that each poll involves statistical uncertainty or a 'margin of error'; and that each was conducted at slightly different periods.

The Commission is of the view that taking a simple mean is reasonable given that polls will only be included if they have a representative sample of at least 1,000 respondents and were all conducted in close proximity to the date of determination.

The Commission also concludes that it is reasonable to require a political party to appear in at least two polls that report explicit information about the support level for that party. As stated previously, the Commission is of the view that public opinion polling organizations are likely to present as options to respondents those parties that could measure 4% or higher in voting intention. Criterion (iii) also states that a party's level of national support shall be measured by polling organizations, meaning more than one organization.

With regards to statistical uncertainty and margin of error, the Commission concludes that it has attempted to mitigate the impact of this unavoidable uncertainty by incorporating multiple polls within its analysis. Additionally, the Commission is aware that polls typically report the maximum margin of error, which is the margin of error when the reported value is 50%. For values less than 10%, as is the case for applying criterion (iii), the margin of error is likely to be smaller. [Footnote1](#)

The Commission therefore concludes that each political party's mean value across the polls in which it receives an explicit level of support, as measured by voting intention, will be used to determine whether it receives a level of support of at least 4%.

III. Conclusion

In making its determination for a political party under criterion (iii), the Commission will select polls that:

Were completed and released in the window from 9 days before to 5 days after the issuance of the writs;

Were conducted by public opinion polling organizations that are either members of the Canadian Research Insights Council (CRIC) or are providing public opinion data to major media organizations, using the organizations' most recent publicly-reported result;

report explicit information about the support level for the party;

were conducted on a nationally representative sample of at least 1000 respondents; and

publicly release methodological information sufficient for verification of the integrity of the poll, including question wording for the vote choice question(s), fielding dates, and details on sample size, weighting criteria, and survey mode.

The Commission will not consider internal party polling or polls commissioned by a political party.

In order to average the selected polls and determine a party's level of support, the polls will be averaged using a simple mean for each party included in at least two polls.

IV. Next Steps

The Commission will make its decision with respect to which political parties meet the debate participation criteria no later than six days after the date the election is called. The Commission will then issue invitations to leaders of those political parties that meet debate participation criteria. A party not invited will have an opportunity to ask the Commission to reconsider within two days of the invitation to leaders. The Commission will make its final decision with respect to any such party within three days of that party's application for review. The tight timelines are being set to ensure that both the debates producer has sufficient time to produce a debate of high quality, as required by the OIC, and that the political parties can properly prepare for the debates in order to ensure they are informative for Canadians.

Annex A – Expert Group process for determining party inclusion in the Leaders' Debates (received August 11, 2021)

Prepared by Peter John Loewen, André Blais, Claire Durand, Allison Harell, Richard Johnston, Daniel Rubenson, and Laura Stephenson (the Expert Group)

Summary

The purpose of this report is to propose a method for determining which parties are eligible to participate in Canadian leaders' debates in the next federal election.

This report reviews the three inclusion criteria set out by the Commission, as well as the principles for determining included parties. After reviewing these, we propose a decision rule for inclusion, justify it according to the principles articulated by the Commission, and then lay out the exact method for determining inclusion given this decision rule.

Criteria for inclusion

On June 22, 2021, the Commissioner, Rt. Hon. David Johnston, released criteria for inclusion in the next leaders' debate. [Footnote2](#) These three criteria are:

(i): on the date the general election is called, the party is represented in the House of Commons by a Member of Parliament who was elected as a member of that party; or

(ii): the party's candidates for the most recent general election received at that election at least 4% of the number of valid votes cast; or

(iii): five days after the date the general election is called, the party receives a level of national support of at least 4%, determined by voting intention, and as measured by leading national public opinion polling organizations, using the average of those organizations' most recently publicly-reported results.

Our purpose is to specify a method to determine which party(ies) should be included according to the third criterion, assuming they do not qualify under the first two criteria.

In addition to the criteria specified, the Commissioner further stated that "With regards to criteria (iii), the Commission will select public opinion polls based on the quality of the methodology employed, the reputation of the polling organizations, and the frequency and timeliness of the polling conducted."

Values

Finally, the Commissioner noted that the criteria were "informed by our guiding principles that debates organized by the Commission should use simple, clear and objective criteria."

Decision Rule

The Commission has set a clear polling standard for inclusion in the Debates: an average level of national support of 4%, as measured by leading national public opinion polling organizations, using the most recent results of each organization, provided those results cover the first five days following the drawing of writs (more colloquially, the 'first five days of the campaign').

The decision rule(s) we recommend for the averaging of polls for each party are the following:

For each party, to include polls from all polling organizations who are members of the Canadian Research Insights Council (CRIC) and/or from polling organizations which are providing public opinion data to major media organizations. Provided that:

The polls report explicit information about the support level for the party;

The poll fieldwork must be completed in the window from 9 days before to 5 days after the drawing of the writ;

The results of those polls were publicly available on or before the fifth day of the campaign;

The polls were conducted on a nationally representative sample of at least 1000 respondents (unweighted);

For each poll, its release is accompanied by the following publicly accessible information: exact wording of questions about vote intention; dates of fieldwork; sample size; weighting criteria, if any; and survey mode;

For any polling firm or organization, the most recent poll satisfying criteria 1-6 will be included;

The polls will be averaged using a simple mean for each relevant party included in at least two polls.

Internal party polls will not be included.

The expert group will report which parties have an average support level equal to or exceeding 4% (unrounded) of decided voters across at least two polls and which parties fall below this threshold.

Justification

The decision rules above satisfy the specifics of the third criterion of inclusion, as well as the guiding values articulated by the Commissioner. First, we believe that our condition (1) of membership in CRIC - the leading accreditation body of Canadian public opinion research firms - or partnership with a major media organization satisfies the Commission's standard of leading national organizations. Moreover, it is a clear and simple rule, satisfying the guiding principles. Second, rule 2 satisfies the guiding principles of simplicity, clarity, and objectivity. Rules 3-6 are articulated to generate the largest number of possible polls, conditional upon them passing a credibility test (rule 6). Finally, the use of simple weighting satisfies the guiding principles of clarity and simplicity.

Process

We articulate a process to implement the above decision rules.

Beginning as soon as possible, the polling partners of major media organizations for the purposes of the election should be identified. Combining these firms with those who are in CRIC will generate the complete set of polling organizations to be considered by the Expert Group.

A definitive list of these organizations that identifies where their polls and accompanying information are posted will be created.

The Expert Group will develop a spreadsheet for calculating average party support.

Following the drawing of writs, the Expert Group will review polls released by all listed polling organizations in the 9 days prior to writs being issued.

Accepted results from the most recent poll conducted by a firm will be entered into the spreadsheet, with polling results updated up to and including the fifth day following the drawing of writs. The Expert Group will also compile all background information for each included poll in a single document.

On the sixth day of the campaign, the spreadsheet and identification of which parties equal or exceed 4% will be presented to the Commissioner, along with a memo explaining the results and any inclusion or exclusion of an individual firms' results.

The final decision will rest with the Commissioner.

On the Expert Group

Peter Loewen is a Professor at the University of Toronto. He is a co-investigator of the Canadian Election Study.

André Blais is a Professor at the Université de Montréal. He is a former co-investigator of the Canadian Election Study.

Claire Durand is a Professor at l'Université de Montréal. She is the former President of the World Association for Public Opinion Research.

Allison Harell is a Professor at the Université du Québec à Montréal. She is a co-investigator of the Canadian Election Study.

Richard Johnston is a Professor emeritus at the University of British Columbia. He is a former co-investigator of the Canadian Election Study.

Daniel Rubenson is a Professor at Ryerson University. He is a co-investigator of the Canadian Election Study.

Laura Stephenson is a Professor at Western University. She is a co-investigator of the Canadian Election Study.

Footnotes

Footnote 1

See <https://www.statschat.org.nz/2015/07/27/cheat-sheet-on-polling-margin-of-error/>

Footnote 2

<https://www.newswire.ca/news-releases/leaders-debates-commissioner-david-johnston-sets-participation-criteria-for-next-federal-general-election-843285606.html>

Party leaders that Meet Participation Criteria for the Leaders' Debates for the 44th General Election

I. Introduction

The Leaders' Debates Commission ("the Commission") is mandated with setting the participation criteria for the leaders' debates and ensuring that the leader of each political party that meets those criteria is invited to participate in the debates.

Based on a review of the evidence and in consideration of professional advice received, the Commission has decided which political parties meet the debate participation criteria.

This document provides an overview of the process to date, determines the parties that qualify under each of the three participation criteria, and provides the Commission's rationale for these determinations.

The leaders of the following political parties will be invited to participate in the debates organized by the Commission for the 44th General Election:

The Bloc Québécois

The Conservative Party of Canada

The Green Party of Canada

The Liberal Party of Canada

The New Democratic Party

II. Overview, Context, and Process to Date

The Commission is mandated to organize two debates (one in French and one in English) for the next federal general election.

As part of its mandate, the Commission is tasked with selecting the party leaders who will be invited to participate in these debates, as set out in Order in Council P.C. 2018-1322, dated October 29, 2018, as amended by Order in Council P.C. 2020-871, dated November 5, 2020 ("OIC").

The relevant parts of the OIC that inform the Commission's mandate state as follows:

Whereas it is desirable that leaders' debates be effective, informative and compelling and benefit from the participation of the leaders who have the greatest likelihood of becoming Prime Minister or whose political parties have the greatest likelihood of winning seats in Parliament;

Whereas it is desirable that leaders' debates be organized using clear, open and transparent participation criteria;

[...]

The mandate of the Leaders' Debates Commission is to:

...

(b) set participation criteria for the leaders' debates and ensure that the leader of each political party that meets those criteria is invited to participate in the debates;

(b.1) make the participation criteria public

(i) for a general election held in accordance with subsection 56.1(2) of the Canada Elections Act, no later than June 30 before the day set by that subsection; or

(ii) for a general election not held in accordance with subsection 56.1(2) of the Canada Elections Act, no later than seven days after the issue of the writs.

The Commission undertook this task by consulting with registered political parties, stakeholders, and the public. It also considered (1) the historical application of debate participation criteria in past Canadian elections; (2) the 2019 Participation Criteria; and (3) the existing public policy documents on the participation criteria and submissions from stakeholders, including the leaders of all registered political parties, the media and the public.

As a result of this process, the Commission developed principles to guide the Commission's creation of the participation criteria. The Commission concluded that the criteria should, to the greatest extent possible:

be simple;

be clear;

be objective; and

allow for the participation of leaders of political parties that have the greatest likelihood of winning seats in the House of Commons.

The Commission concluded that in order to be invited by the Commission to participate in the leaders' debates, a leader of a political party must meet one of the following criteria:

(i): on the date the general election is called, the party is represented in the House of Commons by a Member of Parliament who was elected as a member of that party; or

(ii): the party's candidates for the most recent general election received at that election at least 4% of the number of valid votes cast; or

(iii): five days after the date the general election is called, the party receives a level of national support of at least 4%, determined by voting intention, and as measured by leading national public opinion polling organizations, using the average of those organizations' most recently publicly-reported results.

The Commission announced the criteria on June 22, 2021, along with a detailed rationale of the Commission's decision (the "Criteria Decision"). The Commission notified registered and eligible political parties on the same date of the Criteria Decision.

The Commission also made public how it will apply criterion (iii) on August 16, 2021, along with a detailed rationale. For ease of reference, the Commission's detailed rationale from August 16, 2021 is also contained in this document.

III. The Task: Determination of Parties Meeting the Criteria

The leaders of political parties that meet one of the participation criteria will be invited to the two debates organized by the Commission. Each of the three criteria will be considered in turn to determine those parties that qualify.

A. Criterion (i)

In order to qualify under criterion (i) a leader of a political party must meet the following:

"on the date the general election is called, the party is represented in the House of Commons by a Member of Parliament who was elected as a member of that party."

The 44th General Election was called on August 15, 2021. On this date, the following parties were represented in the House of Commons by a Member of Parliament who was elected as a member of that party, and therefore the Commission concludes that the following parties qualify under criterion (i) and can participate in the two debates:

The Bloc Québécois;

The Conservative Party of Canada;

The Green Party of Canada;

The Liberal Party of Canada; and

The New Democratic Party.

B. Criterion (ii)

In order to qualify under criterion (ii) a leader of a political party must meet the following:

"the party's candidates for the most recent general election received at that election at least 4% of the number of valid votes cast."

The official voting results of the 43rd General Election show that the following parties obtained at least 4% of the eligible votes cast the last election;

The Bloc Québécois;

The Conservative Party of Canada;

The Green Party of Canada;

The Liberal Party of Canada; and

The New Democratic Party.

As such, no party that has not already qualified under criterion (i) meets criterion (ii). Therefore, the Commission concludes that no additional parties qualify under criterion (ii).

C. Criterion (iii)

In order to qualify under criterion (iii) a leader of a political party must meet the following:

"five days after the date the general election is called, the party receives a level of national support of at least 4%, determined by voting intention, and as measured by leading national public opinion polling organizations, using the average of those organizations' most recently publicly-reported results."

In the Criteria Decision, the Commission stated that it would select public opinion polls based on the quality of the methodology employed, the reputation of the polling organizations, and the frequency and timeliness of the polling conducted.

The Commission also stated it may consider professional advice to assist the Commission in how to select the leading national public opinion polls to be used in applying the criterion.

To this end, the Commission sought the advice of the academics organizing the Canadian Elections Study (CES), a university research project initiated in 1965 to examine various aspects of federal elections. The Commission's initial point of contact was Professor Peter Loewen, who in addition to co-leading the CES study for the 44th General Election, is a professor in the Department of Political Science at the University of Toronto and the Munk School of Global Affairs and Public Policy; Associate Director, Global Engagement at the Munk School; and Director of PEARL (Policy, Elections, & Representation Lab).

Dr. Loewen then convened a group of academics to provide advice to the Commission on the application of criterion (iii). The academics convened in this Polling Advisory Group are Peter Loewen, André Blais, Claire Durand, Allison Harell, Richard Johnston, Daniel Rubenson, and Laura Stephenson. Each of these academics is an expert in the field.

The Commission asked the Polling Advisory Group to provide advice to the Commission in order to make a determination under criterion (iii). In particular, the Commission asked the Polling Advisory Group to provide its advice on the following:

The timeframe during which to consider polling results;

Which national public opinion polling organizations to select; and

How to average the polling organizations most recently publicly-reported results.

The Commission received two submissions from the Polling Advisory Group, included in full in Annexes A and B. Taken together, they constitute the Polling Advisory Group's recommendations on these items. The Commission also obtained an absence of conflict declaration from each member of the group.

The group's recommendations for each of the three items, and the Commission's resulting analysis and conclusions will be considered in turn.

In its consideration of each of these elements, the Commission is driven by its guiding principles for debate participation criteria, and in particular that they be simple, clear, and objective.

1. Timeframe

The Polling Advisory Group recommended that polls be included provided that the poll fieldwork "be completed in the window from 9 days before to 5 days after the drawing of the writ." This amounts to a timeframe of 14 days in which to consider polling results. The Polling Advisory Group further explained that this timeframe contributes to the generation of the "largest possible number of polls."

The Commission has stated that it will consider the timeliness of the polling conducted. The Commission is satisfied that the recommendation of the Polling Advisory Group achieves this objective. The Commission concludes that a timeframe of 14 days is reasonable because it will provide the Commission with access to as broad a range of polls as possible for the application of criterion (iii), while still ensuring that the polls used remain in close proximity to the date of determination.

The Commission also examined the historical record by reviewing polls in past elections in the period five days after and nine days before the issuance of the writs. Voting intentions for parties did not frequently show significant movement during this time period.

Some public opinion polling organizations may release multiple polls issued during this period; in these instances, criterion (iii) states that the Commission will consider the organizations' most recent publicly-reported result.

2. Selection of national public opinion polling organizations

The Polling Advisory Group recommended that, in applying criterion (iii), the Commission select polls that:

- a) are conducted by public opinion polling organizations that are either members of the Canadian Research Insights Council (CRIC) or are providing public opinion data to major media organizations;
- b) report explicit information about the support level for the party;
- c) were conducted on a nationally representative sample of at least 1,000 respondents; and
- d) publicly release methodological information sufficient for verification of the integrity of the poll, which would include question wording for the vote choice question(s), fielding dates, and details on sample size, weighting criteria, and survey mode.

The Polling Advisory Group's rationale for these criteria states that, in their view, they satisfy "the guiding values articulated by the Commissioner" in that they are "clear and simple" while still requiring polls to pass a "credibility test."

The Commission has stated that it would select public opinion polls based on the quality of the methodology employed and the reputation of the polling organizations. The Commission is satisfied that the recommendation of the Polling Advisory Group takes this position into consideration.

In considering the recommendation made by the Polling Advisory Group, the Commission has reviewed CRIC's Public Opinion Research Standards and Disclosure Requirements that its members are required to follow. Its objectives are:

To support sound and ethical practices in the disclosure of research;

To ensure research is unbiased and supports decision-making in the public, private and not-for-profit sectors;

To enhance public trust and improve the public's understanding of the use of research; and

To ensure the appropriate transparency and disclosure of research results and methods of studies.

The Commission concludes that CRIC's requirements of its members align with the Commission's mandate and its guiding principles for setting participation criteria, and that therefore polls conducted by CRIC members within the 14-day timeframe are appropriate for inclusion in a determination of average voting intention.

The Commission recognizes that CRIC does not represent the entirety of the Canadian public opinion polling industry. However, the Commission agrees with the Polling Advisory Group that CRIC's membership includes a significant proportion of Canada's national public opinion organizations.

The Commission also agrees with the Polling Advisory Group's recommendation to supplement the pool of available polls by including those organizations who have been contracted by the major Canadian media organizations for the purposes of conducting polls to measure Canadians' voting intentions, as long as these polls satisfy methodological and disclosure requirements. This ensures that CRIC membership is not a necessary condition for inclusion in the Commission's decision-making process while maintaining a focus on the reputation and methodology of the organizations to be considered.

The Commission also concludes that it will not consider internal party polling, as recommended by the Polling Advisory Group, because internal party polling would not satisfy the above requirements that polls be publicly reported and undertaken by a CRIC member or a major news organization. The Commission also will not consider polling commissioned by a political party in order to ensure that the data available for the Commission's consideration is objective.

The Commission agrees with the Polling Advisory Group's recommendation that the measurement of a political party's level of support shall be done using polls where that party receives an explicit level of support. This means that respondents directly indicate their intention to vote for that party.

The Commission assessed this recommendation in light of two related considerations. First, not all polls will provide the option to respondents to indicate support for all political parties. Second, some polls will provide respondents with the option to select "Other" as their voting intention, after a subset of the full list of registered and eligible political parties is presented as a choice. While it may be argued that these two considerations mean that the Commission does not have a complete picture of voting intention for each political party, the Commission concludes that there are several factors that weigh against this argument. The Commission explains these factors in the following paragraphs.

The Commission is of the view that public opinion polling organizations have a professional and reputational interest in presenting to respondents as options those parties that have a meaningful presence in daily political conversation at the time. This means that it is likely that parties that would measure 4% or higher in voting intention are presented as options in their polls.

The Commission further notes that some current polls present respondents with the option to select political parties that have historically registered much less than 4% in past electoral results. Some polls also allow respondents to select newly emerging political parties and/or change the list of available responses over time. All of this evidence indicates that national public opinion polling organizations are likely to present respondents with the opportunity to indicate explicit support for parties that are likely to receive a measured voting intention of 4% or higher.

With regards to polls that have responses for "Other" parties, the Commission concludes that it is not in keeping with the guiding principles to undertake any method that would attempt to assign these voting

intentions to particular political parties or to otherwise infer what respondents wished to indicate with a "Other" response. The Commission therefore concludes that adopting the approach of requiring an explicit level of support is reasonable and ensures the criteria and their application are simple, clear, and objective.

The Commission asked the Polling Advisory Group to consider whether a minimum sample size for polls should be considered, and the Commission agrees with the Polling Advisory Group's recommendation to only include those polls that have a sample size of 1,000 or greater. The Commission has reviewed the recent history of polls undertaken in Canada and notes that almost all polls conducted by leading national public opinion polling organizations use a sample size of 1,000 or more, and so it is unlikely that credible polls will be excluded as a result of this requirement. Polls with a sample size less than 1,000 are likely to have a greater margin of error and may not be comparable to polls with more respondents, and as a result establishing a minimum size of 1,000 will allow for a better comparison amongst the polls selected to determine the average.

The Commission also asked the Polling Advisory Group to provide expert advice on how to assess the credibility of all potential polls that could be used by the Commission. The Polling Advisory Group recommended to the Commission that it provide this expert advice in two parts.

In order to be clear prior to the issuance of the writs on what the Commission will be looking for, the group recommended that polls be included so as long as its release "is accompanied by the following publicly accessible information: exact wording on questions about vote intention; dates of fieldwork, sample size; weighting criteria, if any; and survey mode." The group also recommended that it provide advice to the Commission after the election is called explaining "the inclusion or exclusion of an individual firms' results" by assessing each poll against the pre-identified requirements.

The Commission is satisfied that the Polling Advisory Group's recommendations on the specific components required of each poll to be included in the Commission's analysis, in terms of method, transparency, and disclosure, will help ensure a credible process that aligns with the Commission's guiding principles.

The Commission recognizes that a fully predictable process would seek to name the specific polling organizations to be used in advance of the issuance of the writs but has concluded that in a minority context with an unknown election call date such an approach may limit the polls available for use by the Commission. The Commission concludes that that the two-step process recommended by the Polling Advisory Group, which first identifies ahead of time the requirements for a poll to be included and then after the issuance of the writs provide specific advice assessing each potential poll against these requirements meets the Commission's guiding principles.

The Commission also considered a submission it received from The Conservative Party of Canada stating that the Commission, when making its determination for criterion (iii), should exclude polls from entities that have previously demonstrated a bias or animus towards a federally-registered political party. The Conservative Party of Canada submitted that such a bias exists towards them by EKOS Research Associates.

The Commission has considered this submission in its decision-making process. The Commission also provided this information to Dr. Loewen to ensure that the Polling Advisory Group's recommendations on a proposed methodology for applying criterion (iii) took this submission into consideration.

The Polling Advisory Group's submission recommends that polls be included subject to a number of factors discussed above which assess that poll based on organizational reputation, methodological soundness, and transparency and disclosure standards. The Commission agrees with the rationale of the group and concludes that the Commission's selection of national public opinion polling organizations will be based on these factors. No polling organizations will be excluded simply on the grounds that, in the view of one or more political party, they have previously demonstrated a bias towards a political party.

In its second submission to the Commission, included at Annex B, the Polling Advisory Group identified the following public opinion polling organizations that satisfied their recommended selection criteria, and the date of their most recent publicly-reported results within the 14-day timeframe discussed above, as follows:

Abacus Data (August 18, 2021);

Angus Reid Institute (August 19, 2021);

EKOS Research Associates (August 20, 2021);

Forum Research (August 15, 2021);

Innovative Research Group (August 18, 2021);

Ipsos (August 17, 2021);

Leger (August 17, 2021);

Mainstreet Research (August 20, 2021);

Nanos Research (August 13, 2021)

The Polling Advisory Group conducted an analysis to verify that the above polls met the inclusion criteria set out by the Commission being: who conducted the poll, how questions were asked, and the overall methodology used by the polling organization (see Appendices and supporting links). The Commission has reviewed the evidence provided by the Polling Advisory Group and agrees that each of the above polls meet the requirements for inclusion.

The Commission also asked the Polling Advisory Group what if any polls were released during the 14-day timeframe that did not meet the requirements for inclusion. The Group advised the Commission that Counsel Public Affairs released a poll on August 19, 2021, but that Counsel Public Affairs is not a member of CRIC and is not providing public opinion data to one or more major media organizations.

The Commission therefore concludes that it will use the polls identified above to determine whether any party qualifies under criterion (iii).

In these polls, the following political parties who have not already qualified under criteria (i) or (ii) received some level of national support, as measured by voting intention:

the Maverick Party, and

the People's Party of Canada

3. Averaging the selected polls

The Polling Advisory Group has recommended that, for each political party included in at least two polls, the mean value of that party's level of support as measured by voting intention will be determined using a simple mean across the polls in which it receives an explicit level of support.

The Commission has stated it will use an average of polls in order to make its determination of whether a party receives a level of national support of at least 4%, determined by voting intention. The Commission has considered the Polling Advisory Group's recommendations for how to determine the average of the selected polls. In so doing, the Commission is aware that there are differences amongst the methodologies and sample sizes of the above polls; that each poll involves statistical uncertainty or a 'margin of error'; and that each was conducted at slightly different periods.

The Commission agrees that taking a simple mean is reasonable given that polls will only be included if they have a representative sample of at least 1,000 respondents and were all conducted in close proximity to the date of determination.

The Commission also concludes that it is reasonable to require a political party to appear in at least two polls that report explicit information about the support level for that party. As stated previously, the Commission is of the view that public opinion polling organizations are likely to present as options to respondents those parties that could measure 4% or higher in voting intention. Criterion (iii) also states that a party's level of national support shall be measured by polling organizations, meaning more than one organization.

With regards to statistical uncertainty and margin of error, the Commission concludes that it has attempted to mitigate the impact of this unavoidable uncertainty by incorporating multiple polls within its analysis. Additionally, the Commission is aware that polls typically report the maximum margin of error, which is the margin of error when the reported value is 50%. For values less than 10%, as is the case for applying criterion (iii), the margin of error is likely to be smaller. [Footnote1](#)

The Commission therefore concludes that each political party's mean value across the polls in which it receives an explicit level of support, as measured by voting intention, will be used to determine whether it receives a level of support of at least 4%.

In applying this approach, the Polling Advisory Groups finds, as detailed in its second submission in Annex B, that the results for those parties not already qualified under criterion (i) and (ii) who received a level of national support in at least two polls is as follows:

Party Name	Average Level of National Support	Polls Included to Determine Average (% Received in Each Poll)
Maverick Party	0.7%	Angus Reid Institute (0.9%) Innovative Research Group (0.5%)
People's Party of Canada	3.27%	Abacus (3.5%) Angus Reid Institute (3.5%) EKOS Research Associates (5.2%) Forum Research (5.2%) Innovative Research Group (3.0%) Ipsos (0.7%) Leger (2.4%) Mainstreet Research (4.0%) Nanos Research (1.9%)

The submission notes that, "when results have not been presented to a single decimal point [the Polling Advisory Group has] been in touch with firms directly to obtain this information."

The submission identifies that, in averaging the above polls, no party that has not already qualified under criterion (i) or (ii) has received a level of national support of at least 4 % as determined by voting intention.

The Commission decided on August 16, 2021 that in order to calculate the average of the selected polls to determine a party's level of support, the polls "will be averaged using a simple mean for each party included in at least two polls," and that it was desirable that the Commission would be provided with "access to as broad a range of polls as possible for the application of criterion (iii), while still ensuring that the polls used remain in close proximity to the date of determination."

The Commission nevertheless asked the Polling Advisory Group if - when presented with the final data for analysis – there could be another reasonable method applied to the data that would result in a different outcome for any political party. The Polling Advisory Group advised that neither taking the median nor a trimmed mean (that removes the highest and lowest poll value) would result in a different outcome for any political party. Additionally, the group advised that no one poll is determinative, meaning that the inclusion or exclusion of one poll would not change the outcome for any political party.

The Commission has reviewed and considered the analysis provided by the Polling Advisory Group and concludes that no additional parties qualify under criterion (iii).

IV. Impact of Selection Decision: Objectives & Proportionality Exercise

The Commission acknowledges its decision in applying the participation criteria engages the rights to freedom of expression and the right vote protected under the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. When applying the participation criteria, the Commission is guided by its objectives set out in the OIC and how the Charter values at issue will best be protected in view of its objectives.

The Commission set out in its decision on the participation criteria how it balanced the Charter rights of the both the voters and the party leaders with its statutory mandate. The Commission reiterates and relies upon that analysis in its application of the criteria.

V. Conclusion

The leaders of the following political parties will be invited to participate in the debates organized by the Commission for the 44th General Election:

The Bloc Québécois

The Conservative Party of Canada

The Green Party of Canada

The Liberal Party of Canada

The New Democratic Party

VI. Next Steps

The Commission has issued invitations to leaders of those political parties that meet debate participation criteria. A party not invited will have an opportunity to ask the Commission to reconsider within two days of the invitation to leaders. The Commission will make its final decision with respect to any such party within three days of that party's application for review. The tight timelines are being set to ensure that both the debates producer has sufficient time to produce a debate of high quality, as required by the OIC, and that the political parties can properly prepare for the debates in order to ensure they are informative for Canadians.

Annex A – Expert Group process for determining party inclusion in the Leaders' Debates (received August 11, 2021)

Prepared by Peter John Loewen, André Blais, Claire Durand, Allison Harell, Richard Johnston, Daniel Rubenson, and Laura Stephenson (the Expert Group)

Summary

The purpose of this report is to propose a method for determining which parties are eligible to participate in Canadian leaders' debates in the next federal election.

This report reviews the three inclusion criteria set out by the Commission, as well as the principles for determining included parties. After reviewing these, we propose a decision rule for inclusion, justify it

according to the principles articulated by the Commission, and then lay out the exact method for determining inclusion given this decision rule.

Criteria for inclusion

On June 22, 2021, the Commissioner, Rt. Hon. David Johnston, released criteria for inclusion in the next leaders' debate. [Footnote 2](#) These three criteria are:

(i): on the date the general election is called, the party is represented in the House of Commons by a Member of Parliament who was elected as a member of that party; or

(ii): the party's candidates for the most recent general election received at that election at least 4% of the number of valid votes cast; or

(iii): five days after the date the general election is called, the party receives a level of national support of at least 4%, determined by voting intention, and as measured by leading national public opinion polling organizations, using the average of those organizations' most recently publicly-reported results.

Our purpose is to specify a method to determine which party(ies) should be included according to the third criterion, assuming they do not qualify under the first two criteria.

In addition to the criteria specified, the Commissioner further stated that "With regards to criteria (iii), the Commission will select public opinion polls based on the quality of the methodology employed, the reputation of the polling organizations, and the frequency and timeliness of the polling conducted."

Values

Finally, the Commissioner noted that the criteria were "informed by our guiding principles that debates organized by the Commission should use simple, clear and objective criteria."

Decision Rule

The Commission has set a clear polling standard for inclusion in the Debates: an average level of national support of 4%, as measured by leading national public opinion polling organizations, using the most recent results of each organization, provided those results cover the first five days following the drawing of writs (more colloquially, the 'first five days of the campaign').

The decision rule(s) we recommend for the averaging of polls for each party are the following:

For each party, to include polls from all polling organizations who are members of the Canadian Research Insights Council (CRIC) and/or from polling organizations which are providing public opinion data to major media organizations. Provided that:

The polls report explicit information about the support level for the party;

The poll fieldwork must be completed in the window from 9 days before to 5 days after the drawing of the writ;

The results of those polls were publicly available on or before the fifth day of the campaign;

The polls were conducted on a nationally representative sample of at least 1000 respondents (unweighted);

For each poll, its release is accompanied by the following publicly accessible information: exact wording of questions about vote intention; dates of fieldwork; sample size; weighting criteria, if any; and survey mode;

For any polling firm or organization, the most recent poll satisfying criteria 1-6 will be included;

The polls will be averaged using a simple mean for each relevant party included in at least two polls.

Internal party polls will not be included.

The expert group will report which parties have an average support level equal to or exceeding 4% (unrounded) of decided voters across at least two polls and which parties fall below this threshold.

Justification

The decision rules above satisfy the specifics of the third criterion of inclusion, as well as the guiding values articulated by the Commissioner. First, we believe that our condition (1) of membership in CRIC - the leading accreditation body of Canadian public opinion research firms - or partnership with a major media organization satisfies the Commission's standard of leading national organizations. Moreover, it is a clear and simple rule, satisfying the guiding principles. Second, rule 2 satisfies the guiding principles of simplicity, clarity, and objectivity. Rules 3-6 are articulated to generate the largest number of possible polls, conditional upon them passing a credibility test (rule 6). Finally, the use of simple weighting satisfies the guiding principles of clarity and simplicity.

Process

We articulate a process to implement the above decision rules.

Beginning as soon as possible, the polling partners of major media organizations for the purposes of the election should be identified. Combining these firms with those who are in CRIC will generate the complete set of polling organizations to be considered by the Expert Group.

A definitive list of these organizations that identifies where their polls and accompanying information are posted will be created.

The Expert Group will develop a spreadsheet for calculating average party support.

Following the drawing of writs, the Expert Group will review polls released by all listed polling organizations in the 9 days prior to writs being issued.

Accepted results from the most recent poll conducted by a firm will be entered into the spreadsheet, with polling results updated up to and including the fifth day following the drawing of writs. The Expert Group will also compile all background information for each included poll in a single document.

On the sixth day of the campaign, the spreadsheet and identification of which parties equal or exceed 4% will be presented to the Commissioner, along with a memo explaining the results and any inclusion or exclusion of an individual firms' results.

The final decision will rest with the Commissioner.

On the Expert Group

Peter Loewen is a Professor at the University of Toronto. He is a co-investigator of the Canadian Election Study.

André Blais is a Professor at the Université de Montréal. He is a former co-investigator of the Canadian Election Study.

Claire Durand is a Professor at l'Université de Montréal. She is the former President of the World Association for Public Opinion Research.

Allison Harell is a Professor at the Université du Québec à Montréal. She is a co-investigator of the Canadian Election Study.

Richard Johnston is a Professor emeritus at the University of British Columbia. He is a former co-investigator of the Canadian Election Study.

Daniel Rubenson is a Professor at Ryerson University. He is a co-investigator of the Canadian Election Study.

Laura Stephenson is a Professor at Western University. She is a co-investigator of the Canadian Election Study.

Annex B – Submission by Expert Group re: Party Support Levels (received August 20, 2021)

August 20, 2021

6:00 pm

To: Rt. Hon. David Johnston, Commissioner, Leaders' Debate Commission

From: Peter Loewen, André Blais, Claire Durand, Allison Harell, Richard Johnston, Daniel Rubenson, and Laura Stephenson

We have been asked to recommend which parties have levels of public support sufficient to qualify them under the Commission's third criteria for inclusion in the Leaders' Debates:

"five days after the date the general election is called, the party receives a level of national support of at least 4%, determined by voting intention, and as measured by leading national public opinion polling organizations, using the average of those organizations' most recently publicly-reported results."

To determine which parties have reached this threshold, we designed and followed the process described here: <https://www.debates-debats.ca/en/participation-criteria/44/participation-criteria-approach>

Under the Commission's first two inclusion criteria, leaders of the Liberal Party of Canada, Conservative Party of Canada, New Democratic Party of Canada, Green Party of Canada, and the Bloc Québécois would be included in a debate. For any other parties, the third criterion for inclusion is relevant.

To determine average levels of support for these parties, we considered all publicly available polls completed and publicly available in the 14 day window from August 7 to August 20, inclusive. We have identified 9 polling entries for the People's Party of Canada and 2 polling entries for the Maverick Party

which met our inclusion criteria. Table 1 below presents the information from these polls. We note that when results have not been presented to a single decimal point, we have been in touch with firms directly to obtain this information.

Based on these results, the average level of support for the People's Party is 3.27% and the average level of support for the Maverick Party is 0.7%.

Table 1: Polling results for relevant parties, August 7 to August 20, 2021

Polling Firm	Field dates	Posted date	People's Party Share	Maverick Party Share	Background information
Abacus	August 12-16	August 18	3.5		See Appendix A for background documentation
Angus Reid Institute	August 14-17	August 19	3.5	0.9	See Appendix B for background documentation
EKOS	August 16-19	August 20	5.2		See Appendix C for background documentation
IPSOS	August 13-16	August 17	0.7		See Appendix D for background documentation
Leger	August 13-15	August 17	2.4		See Appendix E for background documentation
Innovative Research Group	August 12 - 16	August 18	3.0	0.5	See Appendix F for background documentation
Mainstreet Research	August 17-19	August 20	4.0		See Appendix G for background documentation
Forum	August 15	August 15	5.2		See Appendix H for background documentation
Nanos	July 14 - August 13	August 13	1.9		See Appendix I for background documentation
Average			3.27	0.7	

Footnotes

Footnote 1

See <https://www.statschat.org.nz/2015/07/27/cheat-sheet-on-polling-margin-of-error/>

Footnote 2

<https://www.newswire.ca/news-releases/leaders-debates-commissioner-david-johnston-sets-participation-criteria-for-next-federal-general-election-843285606.html>

Appendix 6 – International Lessons Learned

1. The number and model of debates per election cycle

Main takeaway: All the countries analyzed organize several debates during their respective election cycles and all have two different types of debates during their respective election cycles. Debates with all candidates and debates with only the frontrunners.

USA: It holds four debates. One vice presidential debate and three presidential debates, after the primary debates.

France: The country has a two-round system to elect its next president. **It held three debates in 2017.** For the first time in its history, France held debates prior to its first round. The two debates prior to the start of the official campaign featured the top five candidates and the other had seven of the 11 candidates running in the presidential race. The second round debate featured the two frontrunners.

Germany: It held four debates in 2021. For the first time since 2002, the country's four television broadcasters (two public and two private) did not hold a joint television a head-to-head debate ("Das Duell") in the 2021 federal election. Instead, there were three three-way debates ("Das Triell") organized and broadcast by the various networks organized (a first in German history) and a final debate with all seven parties in the German parliament, which ran three days before the election (a tradition dating back to the 1970s).

The four broadcasters had previously pulled together over the 16 years that Angela Merkel was Chancellor of Germany. Each had one of their journalists on stage to represent their respective networks when Merkel debated her various challengers over the years.

With Merkel's departure from the political stage, there were all new candidates running for Chancellor and all three were said to be keen to debate. This led to the "Triell," a program of three debates which featured the three main candidates.

UK: It held at least five national debates in 2019, two head-to-head debates with the frontrunners likely to become prime minister and at least three debates with the main candidates or leading figures of all the parties.

The first head-to-head took place at the beginning of the campaign and the second was held six days before the election. The other debates were scheduled closely together towards the middle of the campaign. The UK is also a country, which offers a package of election coverage. This includes one-on-one interviews, town halls and debates.

2. The format. A simple format.

Main takeaway: The experiences of international stakeholders point to a simple format as a fitting approach to serve the public interest.

Stakeholders consulted suggested a “menu” in debate format that is deemed to be in the public interest. It consists of the following three elements:

1. Same questions to all candidates
2. A follow-up question to make sure the candidate responds
3. Discussion from all candidates so there is an interaction

They suggested that flexibility on time and not being authoritative on time as being the model emerging internationally. They advised to avoid complexity in format, as it requires great mental energy.

USA: Their format has six 15-minute blocks, two minutes to answer and equality of time.

France: The format was simple in both debates that took place before the first round in 2017. The five-candidate debate lasted three hours and had three themes with opening and closing statements (1 min 30 seconds for each candidate). It was a newly imagined format with a modern but simple look and feel. The candidates were standing up in a circle with the two moderators standing in the same circle as well but slightly retreated from the candidate. There was an audience behind each candidate.

There was a draw for the opening and closing statements only, not for the questions under each theme. At the start of each theme, a candidate was asked a specific question and had two minutes to answer. After 1 min 30 seconds each candidates could interrupt. It was then an open debate with each of the following questions. Candidates did not have to answer each question. It is up to each candidate whether to answer a question.

The two moderators were there to facilitate dialogue and exchanges. There were clocks in the background, which showed the accumulated time of each candidate. When one candidate was running

lower on time, the moderator would remind of the time and provide the candidate with the opportunity to interject so to make up the time. This was infrequent and not a constant reminder.

France's goal with the five-candidate debate prior to the first round was to be useful to people in terms of learning about the leaders' positions. It provided equality of time to all candidates, even though some parties were smaller. France goes deeper into themes, more so than any other country analyzed.

The seven-candidate debate had a similar structure: four hours, four themes, one-minute opening statement from each leader and one-minute closing statement from each leader.

Germany:

Again, a simple format based on final equality of time in the "Das Triell". There were opening and closing statements, a draw on who would speak first. The candidates knew beforehand how long they had to answer questions. No answer should be longer than one minute. They showed the time to the candidates three times in the show at 15, 30 and 75-minute mark in 90-minute debate. There were no clocks on the set. The two moderators shared the questions, followed-up and had an open debate. The goal was for each candidate to engage in debate. There was very little cross talk as all the three candidates had agreed to be fair with each other.

UK:

Again, a simple format in 2019. There was an audience and it was audience-led debates. The audience generated the questions. The role of the moderator was to follow-up, ensure that the audience's questions were answered; everyone has a fair hearing, and "not to cross-reference the leaders." The moderators would intervene only slightly to avoid people talking over each other and move the debate on.

There was a one-minute opening statement to camera from each candidate, which was the result of the draw. Each question from the audience member was directed to each candidate. It was then an open, free flowing debate. The goal was to have a lively debate, an exchange of views between politicians. There was also a one-minute closing statement established by draw. The debates with all the parties on stage (five and seven candidates) had about eight questions (topics) from the audience. The debates with the two frontrunners had less.

Providing properly illuminating political debate while testing the politicians is an important factor to stakeholders in the UK. Allowing for an opening statement is seen as creating a level playing field where everyone gets their minute to camera, where everyone is allowed to settle and everything is equal before leaders engage in debate. Live debates are deemed high wire acts and uniquely pressurized.

Watching the body language of the leaders, how they cope in this high stakes environment, are considered important components to the debates.

Equality of time for each candidate was one of the principles of the negotiations with the parties for the head to head and with the larger debate with five-seven candidates; equality was also the focus no matter the size of the party.

Stakeholders argue that a simple format works better. They say a debate has to be engaging television but in short, it remains a simple proposition. The aim is to give the candidates the space, time and opportunity to get to grips with policy.

The UK's goal is to allow for proper debate on big issues of the day. It is not necessarily an either or in terms of having less themes or going deeper into them. It is about having the flexibility to understand when you are getting proper runway on an issue and allowing the moment to breathe. Carefully plotting out the themes is key and allowing for the number of themes/questions to maybe whittle down a bit to create the space for emerging debate.

3. Moderation and the moderator

Main takeaway: International stakeholders say that moderation and the moderator are the key ingredients to the debate's success. As such, they select them very carefully.

USA: Stakeholders contend that having one moderator on stage is the pattern that emerges over time because one individual can use time most efficiently and more easily follow up with questions.

The factors recognized to select a moderator include familiarity with the candidates, live television and news experience as well as an understanding that the role is to facilitate debate between the candidates.

France:

Two networks were organizing the debates prior to the first round so each had a representative on stage. The second round debate also featured two moderators. Stakeholders say the moderators selected for the debates need to understand that they are not the stars. They are there to serve and work for the public so that they have the tools to decide on voting day. The French pick team players and not those who want to be in the spotlight. Moderators must know how to step aside and let the

candidates take center stage. It is not about their ego. In France, having two moderators on stage works well. The two of them write the questions together but they know they do not own the questions. In a live debate setting, they know that questions might change from one to the other depending on how the debate is unfolding. They are there to facilitate dialogue rather than engage in interview.

Germany:

Debates there featured two moderators in the recent federal election. German news reported an unevenness this time in the joint "Triell" debate organized by the two national public broadcasters. A highly experienced political journalist who had moderated all the debates since 2002 had been paired with a newly appointed editor-in-chief making his debut as a debate moderator. This is where it was reported that this debate fell down as the less experienced and nervous moderator interrupted unnecessarily, asked long-winded questions, which confused the candidates. The two moderators also interrupted each other. All the major German newspapers wrote about this dynamic. The headlines were: "Why Triell's moderation was so miserable," "The duel of the journalists" and "Why the presenters on "Triell" didn't shine much."

A German stakeholder consulted admitted that this was a lessons learnt from the debate, saying that they could have worked more closer together with meetings every other day with boundaries more clearly defined, meaning one moderator asking one question and the other asking another. He added that there were not the same number of staff on both teams.

UK:

A single person moderates debates in the UK - an experienced journalist that knows that it is not about him/her. One stakeholder said that the number one most important thing as moderator is that you are there as a facilitator, you are there for the audience. This is not a career moment for you. Another stakeholder said that when picked to moderate the debate, the network made it clear to the individual they should not become the story; the debate is about the leaders and a competent debate was wanted.

Stakeholders say a moderator should be a journalist with gravitas and charm with hours of live television experience, who knows the subject, has the respect and trust of the leaders, who can control time, listen to what is being said, and has the ability to firmly but politely close down a discussion and move the debate on. The role of the moderator should facilitate the debate, clarify the positions and hold the leaders to account. More than one moderator does not serve the audience there, as the public needs to know who is in charge and feel confident that they are being taken on a journey.

Stakeholders also added that it is important to have intellectual depth, be known by the leaders and have the ability and confidence to correct a sitting leader and challenge them on their policies. A

moderator also injects some light and shade, some moments of levity, and has the flexibility to adjust when more or less time is needed on a specific theme/question when the debate gets going.

The goal of the moderator is to get the debate flowing and elicit the exchanges between the leaders. It is about well-honed questions that spark passionate debate and get the most out of the answer. Questions are about striking that balance. The role of the moderator is not park journalistic instincts to follow up and interrogate, but rather to tailor them to the format, becoming a different role focused on illuminating the differences between the candidates. Stakeholders say that having a little bit of rebuttal material is important but not too much because a debate is not a substantial interrogation of their position. The best approach stakeholders say is to think what is someone shouting at the television right now and that is the question that needs to be asked when following up.

Appendix 7 – Workshop on Debates Production

The Leaders' Debates Commission held a workshop with experts within the Canadian broadcasting industry. Below is a summary of their inputs.

- The LDC is the only party at the debate table that has no self-interest; all of the other players are self-interested, the LDC should lean into that fact and responsibility
- Many of the decisions made in the early days of the consortium served strategy and did not serve the public interest. The LDC can (and should) challenge those “sacred cows”
- The greatest “value add” of the Commission is that it has created inevitability and predictability around participation
- LDC provides distance on delicate issues (especially participation criteria)
- The executive producers should have more contact with the Commission
- Moderator: one single moderator would be best, but the consortium will not be able to decide on that, it will take leadership from the LDC
- Consider a simplified format:
 - Less focus on time; it can be fair rather than equal
 - Fewer themes
 - Questions from one single moderator
- Eliminate the draw: decisions about placement on stage, order of questions, face-to-face should be made from an editorial perspective
- No consensus on the idea of more time for leaders most likely to be PM
- Number of debates: parties and networks are unlikely to agree to more than two debates
- The CBC/Radio-Canada may be the only one of the main networks who can produce this alone

Appendix 8 – Workshop on Participation Criteria

The Leaders' Debates Commission held a workshop with experts within the polling industry. Below is a summary of their inputs.

- Consensus that the criteria used in 2021 were correct, but they should have been applied later in the process
- LDC should not narrow the window for eligible polls (to ensure maximum number of polls to be included) but should move the window forward, closer to the debates
- Consensus that the window should have been during the writ period, no pre-writ-drop polls should be included
- Window should be based on debate date, not election date
- Strong consensus that the criteria should not be written into statute; it's too difficult to imagine a one-size-fits-all solution
- While there is not consensus on using median vs. mean, the majority of experts at the workshop preferred the simple approach of using the mean
- The majority believed 4% is the right number
- Bifurcation for leaders most likely to form government:
 - If we have some kind of bifurcation, it might change the questions asked. With the PM on the stage, you ask questions about what are you going to do as you form government
 - Feedback that it wouldn't allow for natural change in political landscape (i.e. 2015)
 - Overall, no strong consensus on this, but the majority (although not all) attendees feel that there should be a way to bifurcate around leaders most likely to be PM vs others, whether that be more than two debates, or within the two debates
 - Would need a set of criteria for each set of debates. The criteria for the big debate could potentially be more generous
 - Need to consider who would be official opposition in French debate
- There was support for more than two debates (by some, but not all attendees) but no consensus on whether or not that is possible. Reasons given for why that may not be possible:
 - Campaign is short in Canada
 - Parties won't agree, networks won't distribute (but maybe two of the four could be digital distribution only?)
 - Suggestion that the LDC should not shy away from making the suggestion or just organizing more debates, if the parties don't want to come, then they can decline

Appendix 9 – Workshop on the Future of Debates in Canada

The Leaders' Debates Commission held a workshop on the future of debates in Canada with academics and experts in governance and broadcasting. Below is a summary of their inputs.

- Broad support for a continued mandate for the LDC.
- The establishment of the LDC has in particular made important contributions to the predictability and stability of debates – not only by ensuring that they occur but also through its efforts to provide transparency around leader participation and its efforts on reach, translation, and accessibility.
- The LDC has taken the politics out of the question, “will there be a debate or not?”
- The LDC needs to ensure it is an advocate for, and defender of, debates that are in the public interest.
- Elections are becoming increasingly micro-targeted and composed of controlled conversations. The value of debates and an institution that champions them is to provide events that allow for broad engagement of Canadians.
- It is a critical time to address what was described as an era of potential democratic backsliding around the world.
- The production of debates is necessarily an exercise in compromise. LDC can provide value by ensuring the focus remains on the public while considering these compromises.
- The LDC has been successful in ensuring that political parties don't dictate debate format, but have been less successful in ensuring media organizations don't dictate format.
- Debates need to be about the party leaders, not the people who organize the debate.
- Strong consensus on the importance of simplicity in format and moderation.
- Building knowledge of parties and their positions is a key indicator of success, and research indicates that this was not fulfilled as fully in 2021 as it could have been. The 2021 debates were still a learning event but simplification of format would improve learning of parties positions, allow for new information to emerge and enable leadership choices.
- The high number of questions in the 2021 debate likely put pressure on both moderators and leaders. The 2021 English-language debate included 45 questions, compared to eight questions in the 2008 English consortium debate and six in the 2011 consortium debate.
- The tension between allowing for learning about parties most likely to win seats in Parliament and learning about those leaders most likely to become Prime Minister might be solved by having more than one debate in each language, or by having unequal time for leaders within one debate. The idea of treating leaders differently within a debate by allocating them different amounts of time, however, may be problematic.
- Consensus on overall equal time in terms of fairness.
- The LDC should be prepared to advocate for more debates. Two debates in each language in particular seems to align with findings from the public opinion research and provide more opportunities to learn about parties and about likely Prime Ministers. It could be the LDC that delivers additional debates, or other organizers with LDC encouragement.
- Democracy is about conversation and confrontation of ideas, and well-functioning debates make important contributions in these areas. They need to be fair and informative for people & leaders.

Appendix 10 – Canadian Election Study – Evaluation of the 2021 leaders' debates

Federal leaders' debates:

How Canadians responded to the 2021 debates and what they want for future debates

John R. McAndrews (University of Toronto)

Aengus Bridgman (McGill University)

Peter John Loewen (University of Toronto)

Thomas Bergeron (University of Toronto)

Thomas Galipeau (University of Toronto)

Allison Harell (Université du Québec à Montréal)

Daniel Rubenson (Ryerson University)

Laura B. Stephenson (Western University)

January 5, 2022

Introduction

We were engaged by the Leaders' Debates Commission to conduct a comprehensive examination of the public's response to federal leaders' debates. Our aim was two-fold: first, to investigate how the public evaluated and reacted to the two Commission-organized leaders' debates held during the 2021 federal election campaign; and, second, to explore the public's preferences for how such debates should be conducted in future. We did so by conducting and analyzing three broadly representative online surveys of Canadians and by collecting and analyzing approximately 12 million tweets from before, during, and after the 2021 election.

Our report serves as both a companion to—and an extension of—our 2019 report to the Commission. As in 2019, we report here on the public's awareness, viewership, discussion, and evaluation of the leaders' debates. Like our 2019 report, we also leverage a panel survey design to estimate the impacts that the debates had on citizens' political engagement, knowledge, judgements, and behaviour. We then build on our work by diving deeper into the public's preferences for how debates should be conducted—examining what citizens think should be the goals of such debates, who should participate in the debates, how the debates should be moderated, what formats should be used, and when the debates should be scheduled. The result is—we believe—the most comprehensive and up-to-date portrait available of what Canadians want for their federal leaders' debates.

Summary of findings

We find that the 2021 debates attracted a significant public audience, though somewhat smaller than in 2019. Majorities of both French debate viewers and English debate viewers agreed that the debates

were informative—reserving their most favourable evaluations for how each debate was moderated. We also find that the debates generated several positive outcomes. They contributed, for example, to increases in citizens’ political interest, consumption of news about the federal election, and trust in the federal government.

Looking to the future, we find that Canadians—within the context of a single-debate framework—tend to prefer a multi-topic debate that provides for both wide and equal leader participation and an assertive role for the moderator. Having said this, we also find that the public has an appetite for more than one debate in each official language. This possibility of multiple debates also gives rise to public interest in other, more specialized forms of campaign-based public events outside the recent norm—such as public meetings between leaders and citizens, issue-specific debates, and regionally-focused debates.

Methodology

Survey research

We conducted three online surveys of Canadians. The first wave was conducted between September 2 and September 8—ending just before the start of the French debate at 8 pm Eastern on that day. This first wave sample was constructed from online panels using quotas for region (Atlantic, Quebec, Ontario, and the West), official language, gender, and age (18-34 years, 35-54 years, and 55+ years)—as well as flex quotas for gender and age within region.

By design, the second wave was a recontact of participants who completed the first wave. The sampling for this second wave was done in a convenience framework from among these first wave participants—along with a quota for official language. As described in Section 3.1.1, the purpose of this recontact design was to help identify within-individual change in key political attitudes and behaviours between the period just before and just after the debates.

The second wave was fielded between 10:35 pm Eastern on September 8—just after the French debate ended—through to September 16. The fielding proceeded in two stages. The first stage took place during the 24-hour interval between the end of the French debate on September 8 and the beginning of the English debate on September 9. During this first stage, the survey asked only about the French debate (since the English debate had not yet happened) and only French-speaking participants from the first wave were invited to complete it. A total of 97 French-speaking participants completed during this initial stage. The second stage of fielding began just after the end of the English debate at 11 pm Eastern on September 9. In this second stage, the battery of English debate questions was added and the survey went live to English-speaking recontacts from the first wave.

The third and final survey wave as a fresh cross-section of Canadians. It was constructed from online panels using the same quota-based sampling procedure employed in the first wave. The chief purpose

of this third wave was to provide a detailed snapshot of Canadians' preferences for future debates. It was conducted between November 24 and 29.

To further promote the representativeness of these three online samples, we created survey weights for each survey wave. In the case of each wave, the sample was weighted using an iterative proportional fitting algorithm based on national population estimates for province (region, in the case of the third wave), age category, gender, 2019 voter turnout (2021 turnout, in the case of the third wave), and whether or not the participant was born in Canada.⁴⁹ Note, however, that we report unweighted results for those questions that were administered only to debate viewers (e.g., their evaluations of specific aspects of the debate) because there are understandably no population-level parameters for the demographic composition of debate viewers.

Following standard response quality checks and weighting, the total sample sizes of Waves 1, 2, and 3 were N=2002, N=995, and N=488, respectively.

Using within-participant change to estimate the impact of debate viewership

As noted above, the aim of recontacting Wave 1 participants in Wave 2 was to be able to administer an identical set of questions to the same individuals. In so doing, we can compare their responses from just before the debates to their responses just after the debates. This allows us to estimate the impact of the debates, which we report in Section 4.6.

We use a regression framework to estimate the impact of the debates by regressing the within-individual change in each outcome of interest on a binary indicator that takes a value of 1 if the participant watched either the French or English Commission-organized debates and 0 otherwise. We also include in the model additional covariates for gender, age in years, a 3-category measure of education, and income. In this framework, the regression estimate of the impact of debate watching captures the difference in the between-wave change in the outcome of interest between those who watched a debate and those who did not.

In Section 4.6, we report the results of this regression analysis for 26 different democratic outcomes, ranging from political interest to knowledge to vote choice. The manner in which the within-individual change was operationalized varied by outcome and is detailed in Table 1. All regression models were estimated using ordinary least squares.

Table 1: How the within-individual change was operationalized for each outcome

⁴⁹ The weighting was done with the user-written `-ipfweight-` command in Stata 15.

Figure Number	Name of outcome (DV)	How the outcome was operationalized
23	Change in interest about federal election	<p>Participants were coded as:</p> <p>-1 if they moved from above the Wave 1 median value to at or below the Wave 1 median value;</p> <p>0 if they remained at or below the Wave 1 median value or remained above the Wave 1 median value;</p> <p>1 if they moved from at or below the Wave 1 median value to above the Wave 1 median value.</p> <p>The Wave 1 median value was 7 on a 0 to 10 scale.</p>
	Change in issue mentions	<p>Participants were coded as:</p> <p>-1 if they moved from above the Wave 1 median value to at or below the Wave 1 median value;</p> <p>0 if they remained at or below the Wave 1 median value or remained above the Wave 1 median value;</p> <p>1 if they moved from at or below the Wave 1 median value to above the Wave 1 median value.</p> <p>The Wave 1 median value was 3 on a 0 to 6 scale.</p>
	Change in news consumption about federal election	<p>Participants were coded as:</p> <p>-1 if they moved from above the Wave 1 median value to at or below the Wave 1 median value;</p> <p>0 if they remained at or below the Wave 1 median value or remained above the Wave 1 median value;</p> <p>1 if they moved from at or below the Wave 1 median value to above the Wave 1 median value.</p> <p>The Wave 1 median value was 1 on a 0 to 4 scale.</p>
	Change in discussion of federal election	<p>Participants were coded as:</p> <p>-1 if they moved from above the Wave 1 median value to at or below the Wave 1 median value;</p>

Figure Number	Name of outcome (DV)	How the outcome was operationalized
		<p>0 if they remained at or below the Wave 1 median value or remained above the Wave 1 median value;</p> <p>1 if they moved from at or below the Wave 1 median value to above the Wave 1 median value.</p> <p>The Wave 1 median value was 0 on a 0 to 3 scale.</p>
	Change in interest about politics generally	<p>Participants were coded as:</p> <p>-1 if they moved from above the Wave 1 median value to at or below the Wave 1 median value;</p> <p>0 if they remained at or below the Wave 1 median value or remained above the Wave 1 median value;</p> <p>1 if they moved from at or below the Wave 1 median value to above the Wave 1 median value.</p> <p>The Wave 1 median value was 7 on a 0 to 10 scale.</p>
	Change in news consumption in general	<p>Participants were coded as:</p> <p>-1 if they moved from above the Wave 1 median value to at or below the Wave 1 median value;</p> <p>0 if they remained at or below the Wave 1 median value or remained above the Wave 1 median value;</p> <p>1 if they moved from at or below the Wave 1 median value to above the Wave 1 median value.</p> <p>The Wave 1 median value was 3 on a 1 to 6 scale.</p>
24	Change in knowledge of party promises	<p>Participants were coded as:</p> <p>-1 if they moved from above the Wave 1 median value to at or below the Wave 1 median value;</p> <p>0 if they remained at or below the Wave 1 median value or remained above the Wave 1 median value;</p> <p>1 if they moved from at or below the Wave 1 median value to above the Wave 1 median value.</p>

Figure Number	Name of outcome (DV)	How the outcome was operationalized
		The Wave 1 median value was 2 on a 0 to 10 scale.
	Change in knowledge of current economic and social conditions	<p>Participants were coded as:</p> <p>-1 if they moved from above the Wave 1 median value to at or below the Wave 1 median value;</p> <p>0 if they remained at or below the Wave 1 median value or remained above the Wave 1 median value;</p> <p>1 if they moved from at or below the Wave 1 median value to above the Wave 1 median value.</p> <p>The Wave 1 median value was 1 on a 0 to 4 scale.</p>
	Chance in confidence to make a good voting decision	<p>Participants were coded as:</p> <p>-1 if they moved from above the Wave 1 median value to at or below the Wave 1 median value;</p> <p>0 if they remained at or below the Wave 1 median value or remained above the Wave 1 median value;</p> <p>1 if they moved from at or below the Wave 1 median value to above the Wave 1 median value.</p> <p>The Wave 1 median value was 7 on a 0 to 10 scale.</p>
25	Change in ability to evaluate party leaders' traits	<p>Participants were coded as:</p> <p>-1 if they moved from above the Wave 1 median value to at or below the Wave 1 median value;</p> <p>0 if they remained at or below the Wave 1 median value or remained above the Wave 1 median value;</p> <p>1 if they moved from at or below the Wave 1 median value to above the Wave 1 median value.</p> <p>The Wave 1 median value was 15 on a 0 to 20 scale.</p>
	Change in ability to rate all five leaders	<p>Participants were coded as:</p> <p>-1 if they rated all five party leaders in Wave 1 but did not rate all five party leaders in Wave 2;</p>

Figure Number	Name of outcome (DV)	How the outcome was operationalized
		<p>0 if they did not rate all five party leaders in both Wave 1 and 2, or if they rated all five party leaders in both Wave 1 and 2;</p> <p>1 if they did not rate all five party leaders in Wave 1 but did rate all five party leaders in Wave 2.</p>
	Change in ability to rate all five parties	<p>Participants were coded as:</p> <p>-1 if they rated all five parties in Wave 1 but did not rate all five parties in Wave 2;</p> <p>0 if they did not rate all five parties in both Wave 1 and 2, or if they rated all five parties in both Wave 1 and 2;</p> <p>1 if they did not rate all five parties in Wave 1 but did rate all five parties in Wave 2.</p>
	Change in ability to place all five parties on left-right scale	<p>Participants were coded as:</p> <p>-1 if they placed all five parties in Wave 1 but did not place all five parties in Wave 2;</p> <p>0 if they did not place all five parties in both Wave 1 and 2, or if they placed all five parties in both Wave 1 and 2;</p> <p>1 if they did not place all five parties in Wave 1 but did place all five parties in Wave 2.</p>
26	Change in leader ratings	<p>For each participant, we first computed the absolute difference for each of their leader feeling thermometer ratings between Wave 1 and 2, and then we computed the average of these absolute differences.</p> <p>The original leader ratings were on a 0 to 100 scale.</p>
	Change in party ratings	<p>For each participant, we first computed the absolute difference for each of their party feeling thermometer ratings between Wave 1 and 2, and then we computed the average of these absolute differences.</p> <p>The original party ratings were on a 0 to 100 scale.</p>
	Change in left-right placement	<p>For each participant, we first computed the absolute difference for each of their party left-right placements</p>

Figure Number	Name of outcome (DV)	How the outcome was operationalized
		<p>between Wave 1 and 2, and then we computed the average of these absolute differences.</p> <p>The original left-right part placement scale ran from 0 to 10.</p>
	Change in best party to handle the most important issue	<p>Participants were coded as:</p> <p>0 if their answer in Wave 1 was the same as their answer in Wave 2;</p> <p>1 if their answer in Wave 1 differed from their answer in Wave 2.</p>
27	Change in political efficacy	<p>Participants were coded as:</p> <p>-1 if they moved from above the Wave 1 median value to at or below the Wave 1 median value;</p> <p>0 if they remained at or below the Wave 1 median value or remained above the Wave 1 median value;</p> <p>1 if they moved from at or below the Wave 1 median value to above the Wave 1 median value.</p> <p>The Wave 1 median value was 1 on a 0 to 3 scale.</p>
	Change in satisfaction with Canadian democracy	<p>Participants were coded as:</p> <p>-1 if they moved from above the Wave 1 median value to at or below the Wave 1 median value;</p> <p>0 if they remained at or below the Wave 1 median value or remained above the Wave 1 median value;</p> <p>1 if they moved from at or below the Wave 1 median value to above the Wave 1 median value.</p> <p>The Wave 1 median value was 2 on a 0 to 3 scale.</p>
	Change in trust in the courts	<p>Participants were coded as:</p> <p>-1 if they moved from above the Wave 1 median value to at or below the Wave 1 median value;</p>

Figure Number	Name of outcome (DV)	How the outcome was operationalized
		<p>0 if they remained at or below the Wave 1 median value or remained above the Wave 1 median value;</p> <p>1 if they moved from at or below the Wave 1 median value to above the Wave 1 median value.</p> <p>The Wave 1 median value was 4 on a 1 to 5 scale.</p>
	Change in trust in the federal government	<p>Participants were coded as:</p> <p>-1 if they moved from above the Wave 1 median value to at or below the Wave 1 median value;</p> <p>0 if they remained at or below the Wave 1 median value or remained above the Wave 1 median value;</p> <p>1 if they moved from at or below the Wave 1 median value to above the Wave 1 median value.</p> <p>The Wave 1 median value was 3 on a 1 to 5 scale.</p>
	Change in trust in the media	<p>Participants were coded as:</p> <p>-1 if they moved from above the Wave 1 median value to at or below the Wave 1 median value;</p> <p>0 if they remained at or below the Wave 1 median value or remained above the Wave 1 median value;</p> <p>1 if they moved from at or below the Wave 1 median value to above the Wave 1 median value.</p> <p>The Wave 1 median value was 3 on a 1 to 5 scale.</p>
	Change in trust in political parties	<p>Participants were coded as:</p> <p>-1 if they moved from above the Wave 1 median value to at or below the Wave 1 median value;</p> <p>0 if they remained at or below the Wave 1 median value or remained above the Wave 1 median value;</p> <p>1 if they moved from at or below the Wave 1 median value to above the Wave 1 median value.</p>

Figure Number	Name of outcome (DV)	How the outcome was operationalized
		The Wave 1 median value was 3 on a 1 to 5 scale.
28	Change in intention to turn out to vote	Participants were coded as: -1 if they moved from certain to vote to not certain to vote; 0 if they remained either not certain to vote or certain to vote; 1 if they moved from not certain to vote to certain to vote.
	Change in vote choice	Participants were coded as: 0 if their answer in Wave 1 was the same as their answer in Wave 2; 1 if their answer in Wave 1 differed from their answer in Wave 2.
	Change in expected future engagement in non-voting forms of political engagement	Participants were coded as: -1 if they moved from above the Wave 1 median value to at or below the Wave 1 median value; 0 if they remained at or below the Wave 1 median value or remained above the Wave 1 median value; 1 if they moved from at or below the Wave 1 median value to above the Wave 1 median value. The Wave 1 median value was 0.333 on a 0 to 3 scale.

Social media research

Twitter is the site of much Canadian political discussion. Candidates, party leaders, journalists, electoral management bodies, and many Canadians use Twitter to keep up to date with recent political developments and to share their perspectives on politics. Of the approximately 35% of Canadians who use Twitter, 46% of these users (16% of all Canadians) use the platform to get political information.⁵⁰

There are other social media platforms on which Canadians discussed the 2021 election. These include Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, TikTok, Reddit, Tumblr, 4Chan, Gab, Rumble, Telegram, Discord, and many more. This report draws exclusively upon Twitter data given that it is almost entirely publicly

⁵⁰ Gruzd, Anatoliy, and Philip Mai. 2020. "The State of Social Media in Canada 2020." SSRN Scholarly Paper ID 3651206. Rochester, NY: Social Science Research Network. <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3651206>.

available and accessible. Other social media sites may offer additional insights beyond those on Twitter, and further research should be done to evaluate the extent to which the findings on Twitter are reflective of the broader online community.

For this analysis, we use two Twitter data sources. First, we tracked a broad set of politics-related hashtags and keywords throughout the 2021 election—yielding a dataset of approximately 12 million tweets from two weeks before the writ period to two weeks after the writ period. In this group, we identified 84,560 individuals who consistently posted about Canadian politics on Twitter throughout the election. Second, we identified approximately 1.6 million likely Canadians based on their description and location and collected all tweets from them during the same period. We collected 265,835 accounts that actively tweeted on any subject throughout the election. This second dataset is more representative of the broader Canadian conversation on Twitter and allows insight into the extent to which Canadians use Twitter for politics and, of those, who commented on the debates. A full list of handles and hashtags tracked is available from the study authors upon request.

To help assess the content of tweets, we conducted a sentiment analysis using the Lexicoder dictionary (Young and Soroka 2012) for English-language texts, and a French-language translation of the Lexicoder dictionary for French-language texts (Duval and Pétry 2016). These tools identify a set of positive and negative word tokens that can be measured over a set of texts to classify those texts as generally negative or positive in tone. The proportion of positive to negative words allows the overall tone of a set of texts to be identified in an automated manner.

Findings

Public awareness in the run up to the debates

Overall awareness and across demographic groups

In the lead up to the debates, we asked participants in the first wave of the survey whether they were aware of each of the upcoming Commission-organized debates. Figure 1 presents the results for the September 8, 2021 French-language leaders' debate by participant language. Forty percent of French-speaking participants indicated that they had indeed “read, seen, or heard” something about the French debate; one-quarter of English-speaking participants said the same.

Have you read, seen, or heard anything about the French-language leaders' debate scheduled for Wednesday, September 8?

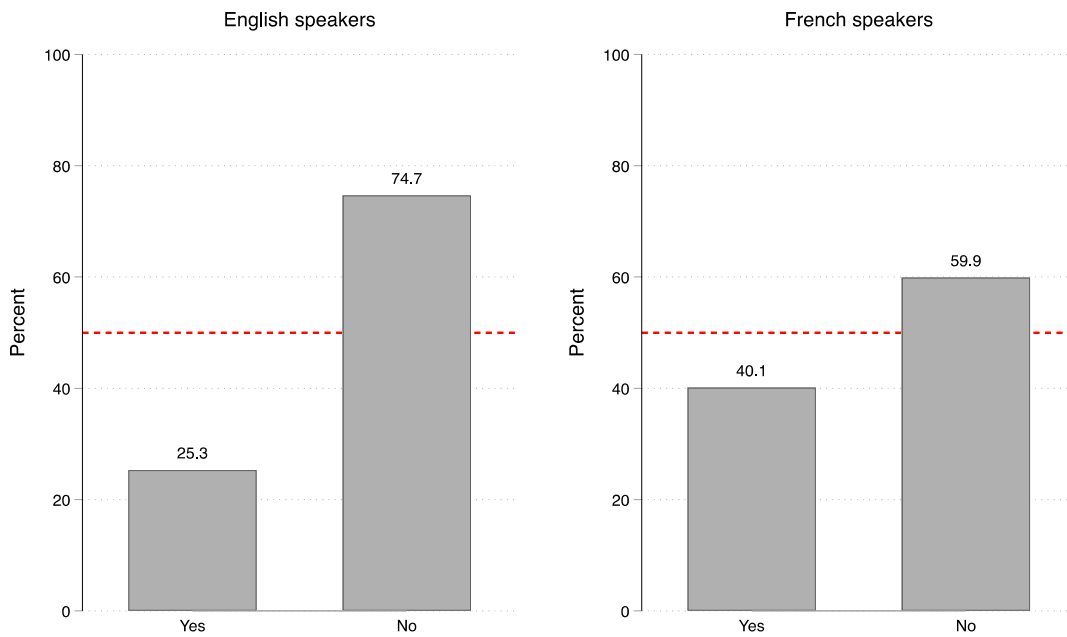


Figure 1: Awareness of the September 8, 2021 French-language leaders' debate, by participant language. *Note: survey responses are weighted.*

Figure 2 presents the results for the September 9, 2021 English-language leaders' debate—again by participant language. This time, 26% of English-speaking participants indicated that they had indeed “read, seen, or heard” something about the English debate, while 17% of French-speaking participants said the same.

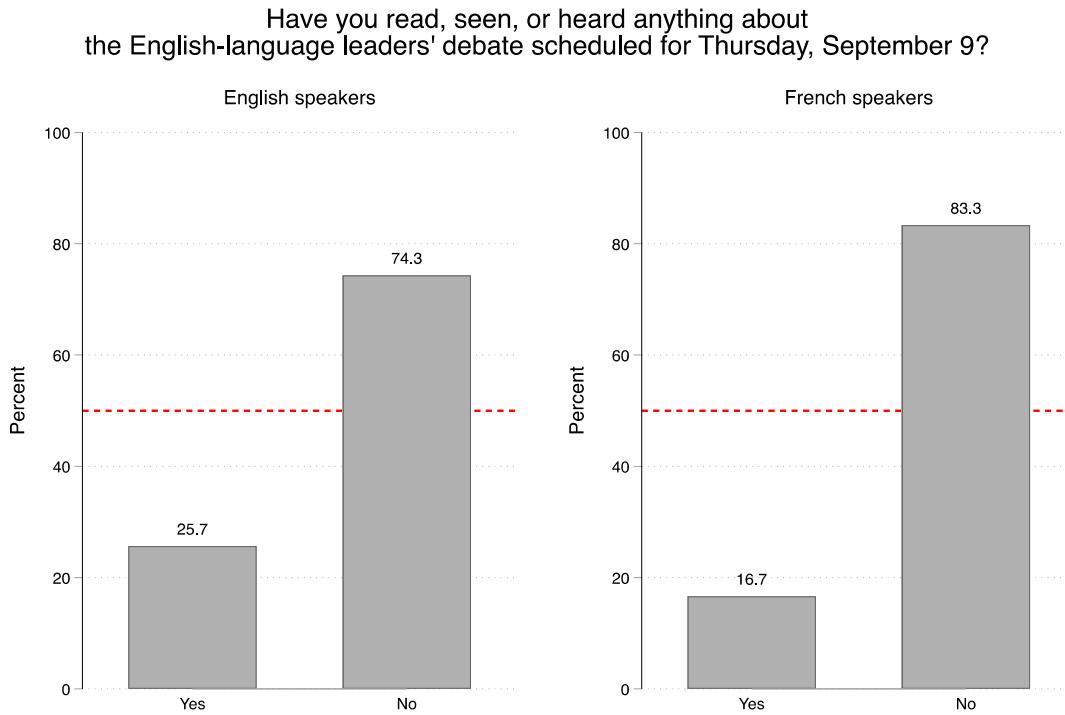


Figure 2: Awareness of the September 9, 2021 English-language leaders’ debate, by participant language. *Note: survey responses are weighted.*

We highlight two points with regard to pre-debate awareness. First, and not very surprisingly, the awareness of a debate is greater among participants who speak the language of the debate: that is, greater among French speakers than English speakers for the French debate, and greater among English speakers than French speakers for the English debate. This is very likely a function of the media markets in which the debates are advertised and promoted.

Second, debate awareness is relatively modest. This low anticipatory salience is reflected in the analysis of the Twitter conversation in Section 4.1.2. While variation in individuals’ attention to politics naturally places a limit on aggregate public awareness of the debates, and awareness of the election more broadly, there may still be opportunity to drive up debate awareness—particularly in the English market—in future federal election campaigns.

We also explored how awareness of the debates may have varied across particular demographic groups. To do this, we modeled a single binary indicator of debate awareness as a function of disability identity, ethnicity, rural/urban residence, official language minority status, and age. A plot of the OLS coefficients, and their associated 95% confidence intervals, are reported in Figure 3. We find that: (1) rural residents were roughly 6 percentage points less likely to be aware of the upcoming debates than

urban residents; (2) official language minorities were roughly 10 percentage points more likely to be aware of the debates than those who are not official language minorities; and (3) each additional year of age is associated with a 0.3 percentage point increase in debate awareness. We did not find disability or ethnicity to be associated with differences in debate awareness at a conventional level of statistical significance.

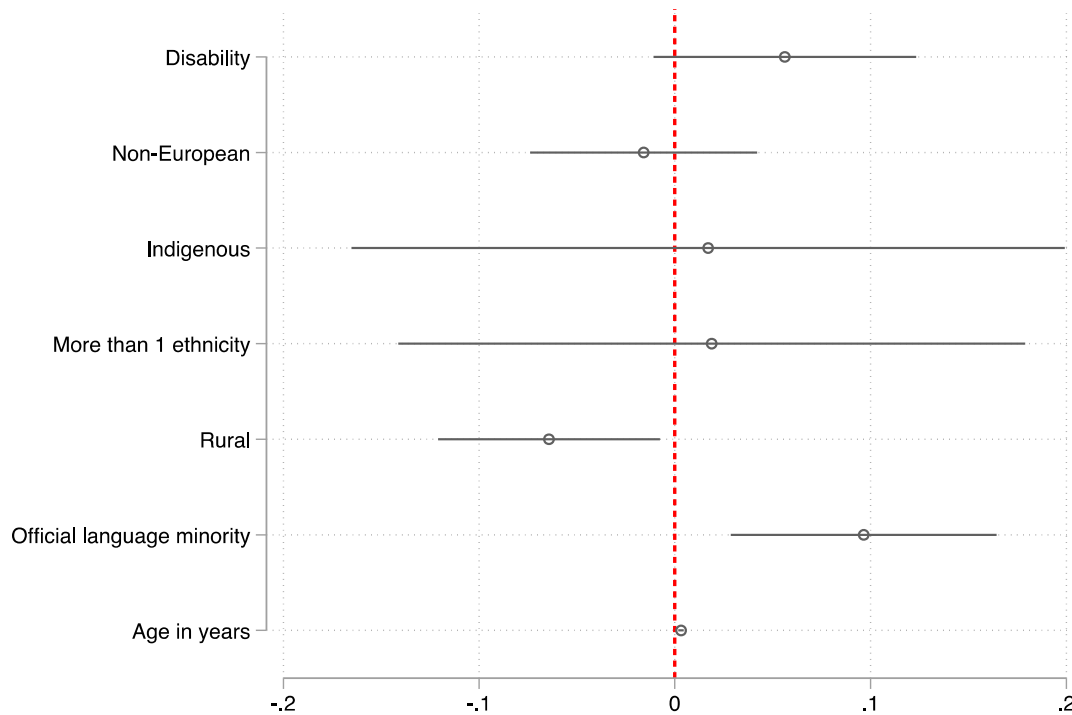


Figure 3: Demographic correlates of debate awareness. Note: 95% confidence intervals. Survey responses are weighted. The dependent variable is binary (1 if the participant said they were aware of either debate; 0 otherwise). Disability is measured by participant self-identification; the reference category is no disability. Ethnicity/ancestry is categorized as European, Non-European, Indigenous, or more than one ethnicity; the reference category is European. Rural consists of participants who report living in either “A small town” or “A rural place”; the reference category is urban (i.e., participants who report living in “A large city,” “A medium sized city,” or “A large town.”) Official language minority is identified as either (a) a participant who learned French as a child, still understands French, and lives outside Quebec; or (b) a participant who learned English as a child, still understands English, and lives in Quebec; the reference category is not an official language minority. Age in years is treated as continuous.

Prior to the debates, the public was invited to submit questions or topics for possible consideration during the debates. In the first wave of the survey, we asked participants whether they had heard about

this opportunity. The results, reported in Figure 4, show that a very large majority had not. We find that only 16% of Canadians were aware that they could make these submissions. As with public awareness of the debates more broadly, there is an opportunity to expand the public’s engagement in future election campaigns. Indeed, as we show in Section 4.7.3, there is significant public support for debates in which “regular citizens” put questions to the party leaders. Thus, expanded awareness about the question submission process may stimulate greater interest in the debates themselves.

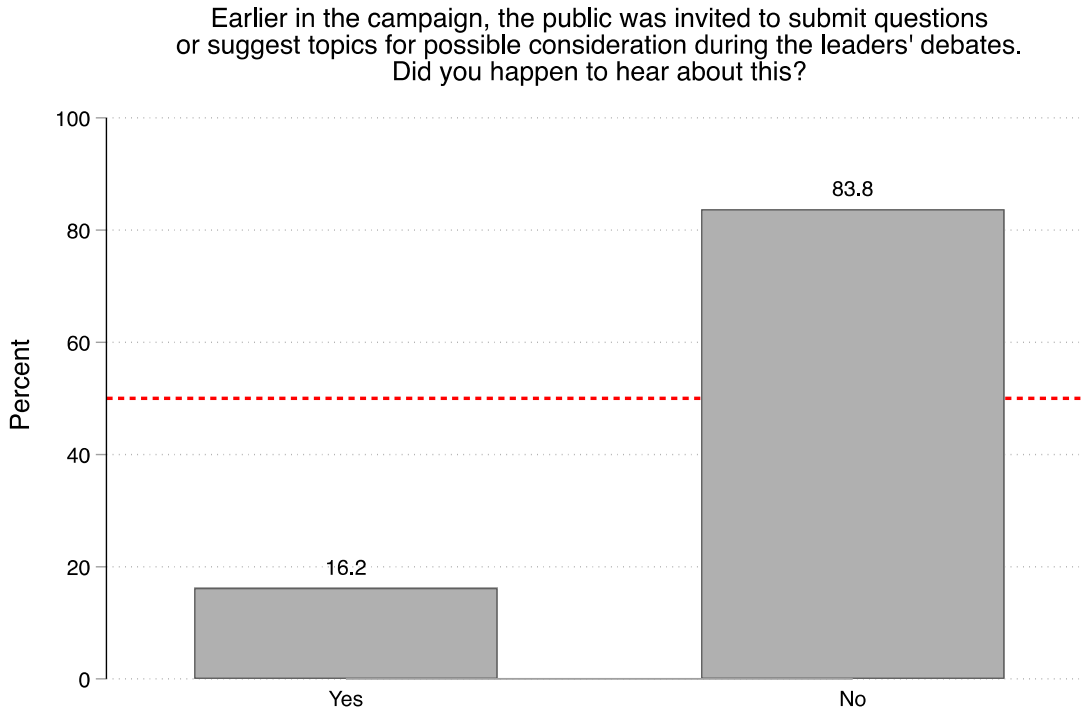
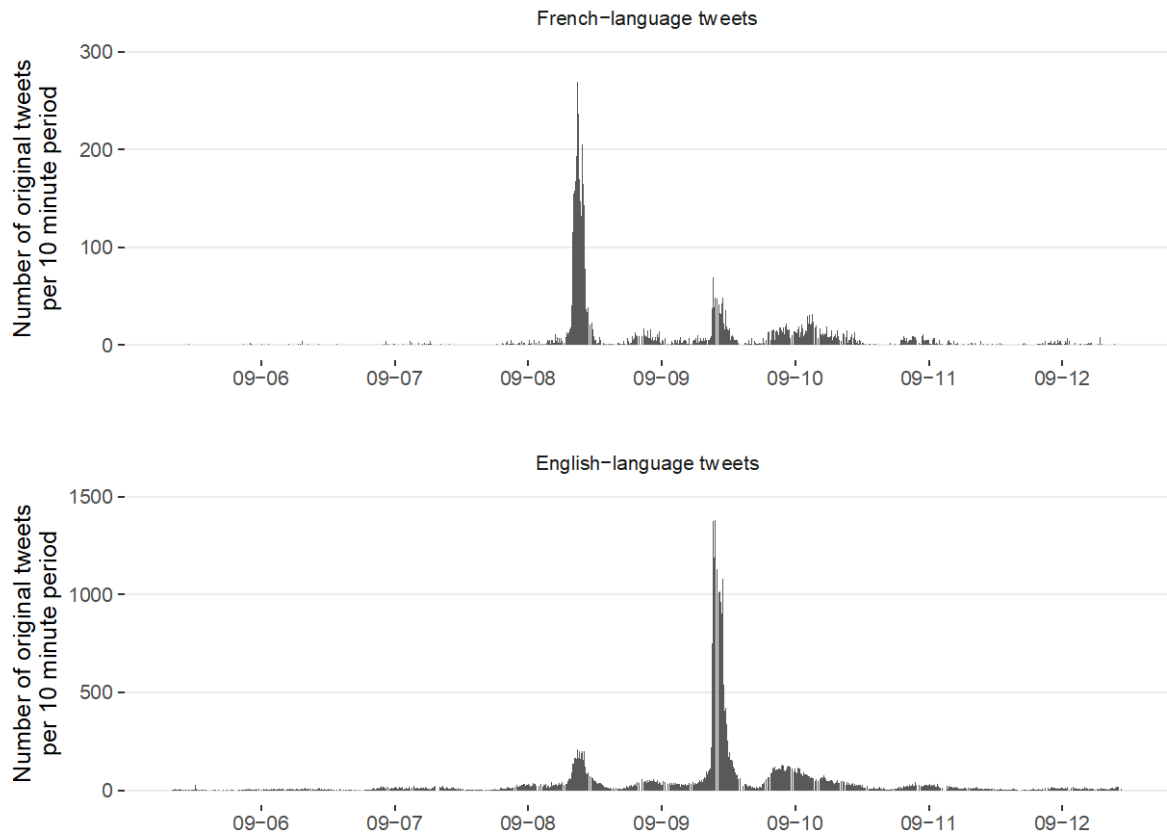


Figure 4: Awareness of the public’s ability to submit questions and topics for use during a leaders’ debate. *Note: survey responses are weighted.*

Pre-debate mentions on Twitter

We also evaluated anticipation of the debates using Twitter data. Here we searched the Canadian politics tweet dataset for mentions of “debate,” “débat,” and moderator names. Figure 5 shows debate-related mentions from 3 days before the French-language leaders’ debate to 3 days after the English-language leaders’ debate. The top panel shows the volume of French-language tweets and the bottom panel shows the volume of English-language tweets. There was minimal anticipatory discussion on Twitter, with the bulk of the conversation happening during the debates themselves and during the day after the English-language debate.



French- and English-language original tweets related to the debates from September 6 to September 12, # with debate periods highlighted. Based on 45955 original debate-related tweets (retweets excluded).

Figure 5: Volume of debate-related tweets in the week surrounding the leaders' debates.

Viewership of the debates

Overall viewership and across demographic groups

We analyzed viewership details using self-reports from the second wave of the survey. Figure 6 reports viewership of the French debate by participant language. We estimate that just under one-third of French-speakers (32%), mostly from Quebec, watched the September 8 French debate. Less than one in ten (8.4%) of English-speaking Canadians did the same.

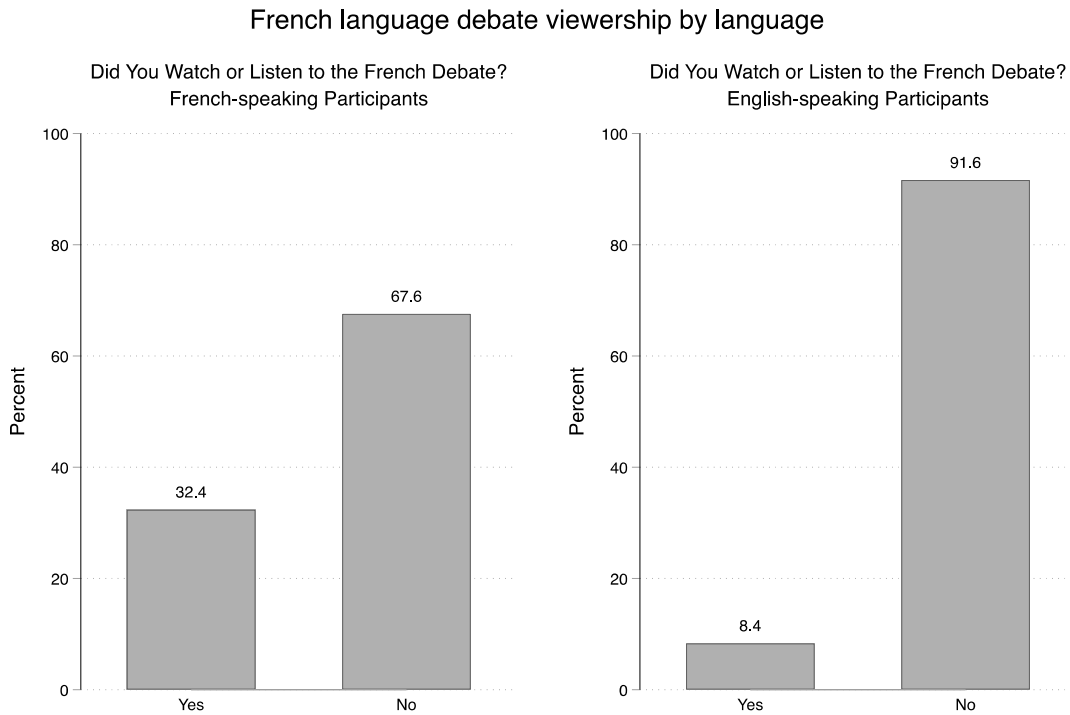


Figure 6: French debate viewership, by participant language. *Note: survey responses are weighted.*

Figure 7 reports the viewership of the English debate—again disaggregated by participant language. We estimate that 29% of English-speakers watched the September 9 English debate—while 14% of French-speakers did the same.

English language debate viewership by language

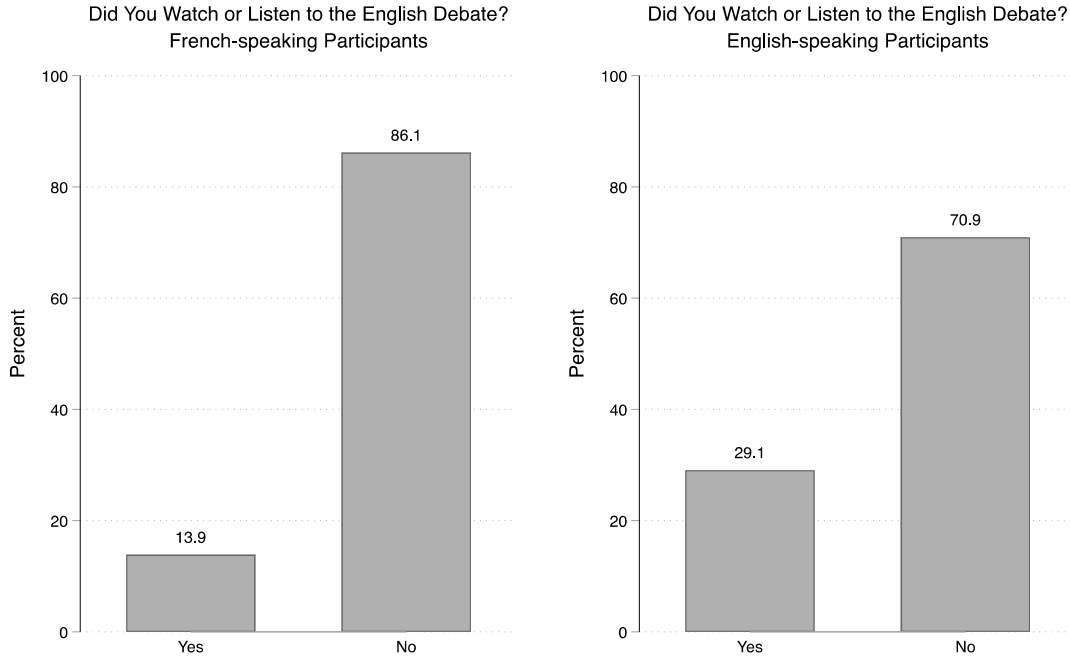


Figure 7: English language debate viewership, by participant language. *Note: survey responses are weighted.*

As we did in our analysis of pre-debate awareness, we also examine how viewership of the debates varied across certain demographic groups. To do this, we modeled a binary indicator of debate viewership as a function of disability identity, ethnicity, rural/urban residence, official language minority status, and age. Figure 8 reports the OLS point estimates and their associated 95% confidence intervals. These results point to a pattern similar to that of pre-debate awareness. We find that: (1) rural residents were approximately 10 percentage points less likely than urban residents to watch a debate; and (2) official language minorities were 15 percentage points more likely to watch a debate than those who are not official language minorities. Disability identity, ethnicity/ancestry, and age did not have a statistically significant impact on debate watching at the $p < .05$ level.

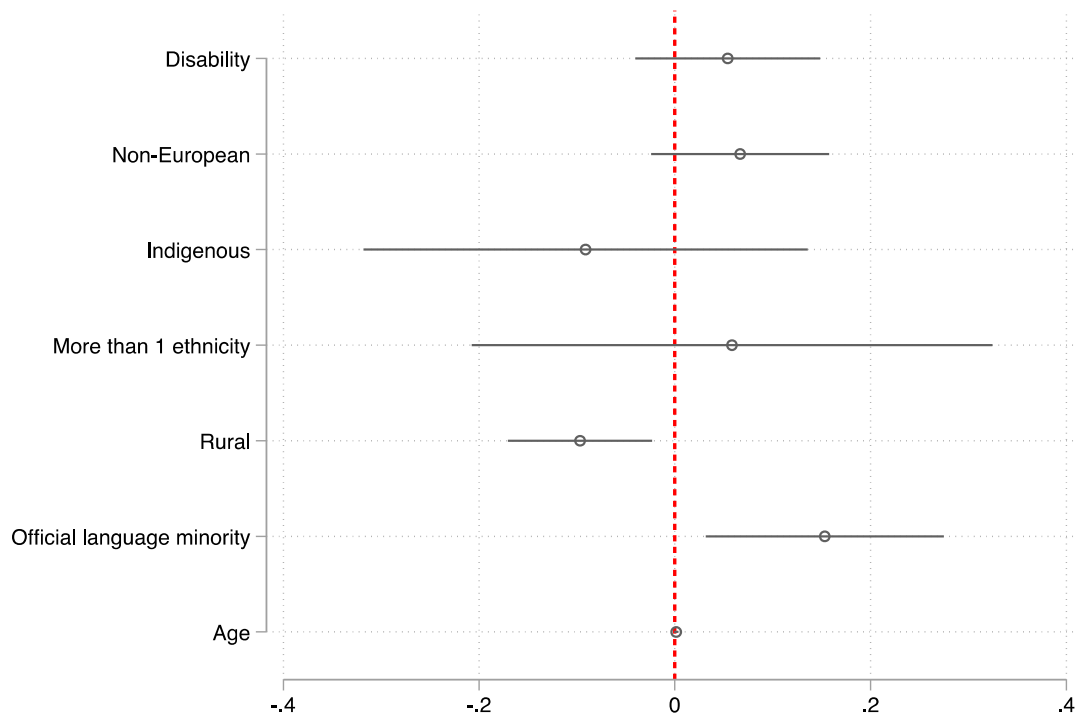


Figure 8: Correlates of debate viewership by demographic group. *Note: 95% confidence intervals. Survey responses are weighted. The dependent variable is binary (1 if the participant said they watched at least one of the two Commission-organized debates; 0 otherwise). Disability is measured by participant self-identification; the reference category is no disability. Ethnicity/ancestry is categorized as European, Non-European, Indigenous, or more than one ethnicity; the reference category is European. Rural consists of participants who report living in either “A small town” or “A rural place”; the reference category is urban (i.e., participants who report living in “A large city,” “A medium sized city,” or “A large town.”) Official language minority is identified as either (a) a participant who learned French as a child, still understands French, and lives outside Quebec; or (b) a participant who learned English as a child, still understands English, and lives in Quebec; the reference category is not an official language minority. Age in years is treated as continuous.*

Duration of viewership

We deepened our understanding of viewership patterns by asking those who watched/listened to a debate: how much time did you spend watching or listening? The distribution of responses is reported in Figure 9. The pattern is similar for both debates: a majority of those who tuned in did so for a majority of the time. Roughly one quarter of the viewership of each debate tuned in for the entire two-hour debate. At the same time, roughly 35% of the French debate viewership—and 37% of the English debate viewership—watched/listened for 30 minutes or less.

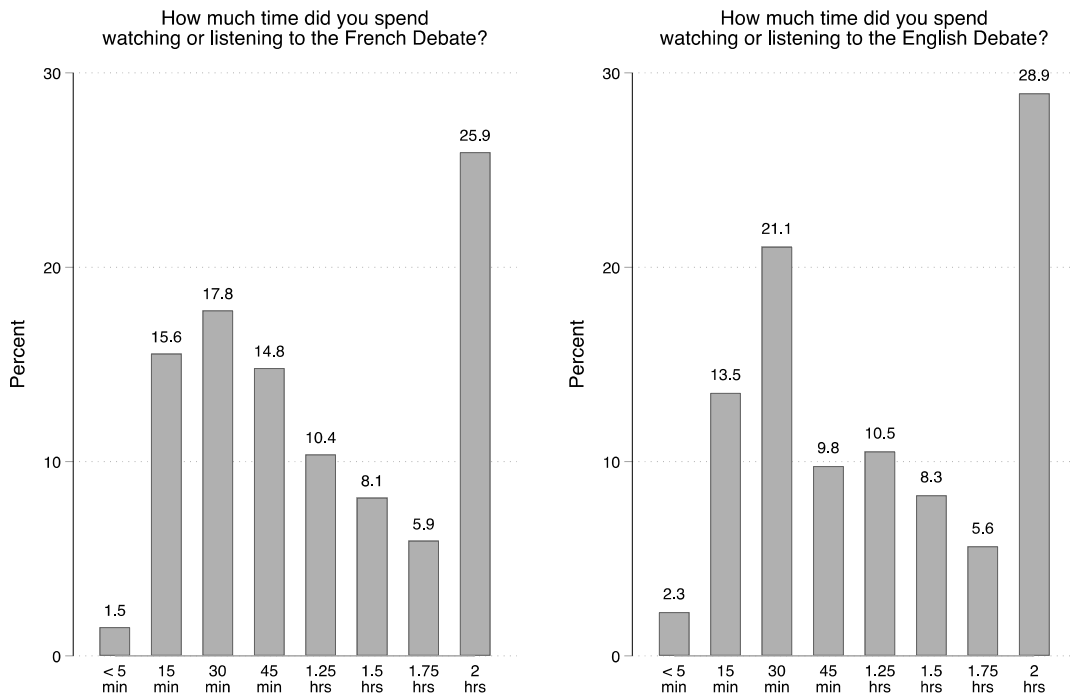


Figure 9: Duration of viewership, by debate. *Note: survey responses are unweighted.*

We believe that these findings—particularly the fact that only about a quarter of the viewership watched/listened to the full two-hour debate—is an important point of reflection for understanding how Canadians choose to consume modern leaders’ debates. It also provides some additional context when interpreting the impacts of debate viewership set out in Section 4.6.

Viewership medium

Debate viewers were also asked how they watched the debates: i.e., on television, on the radio, or online. The results are reported, for both debates, in Figure 10. The findings are virtually identical for the French and English debates: the vast majority of viewers—nearly four in five—watched on television. Just under one in five watched online and only 3-4% listened on the radio. In short, television remains the dominant medium of debate consumption.

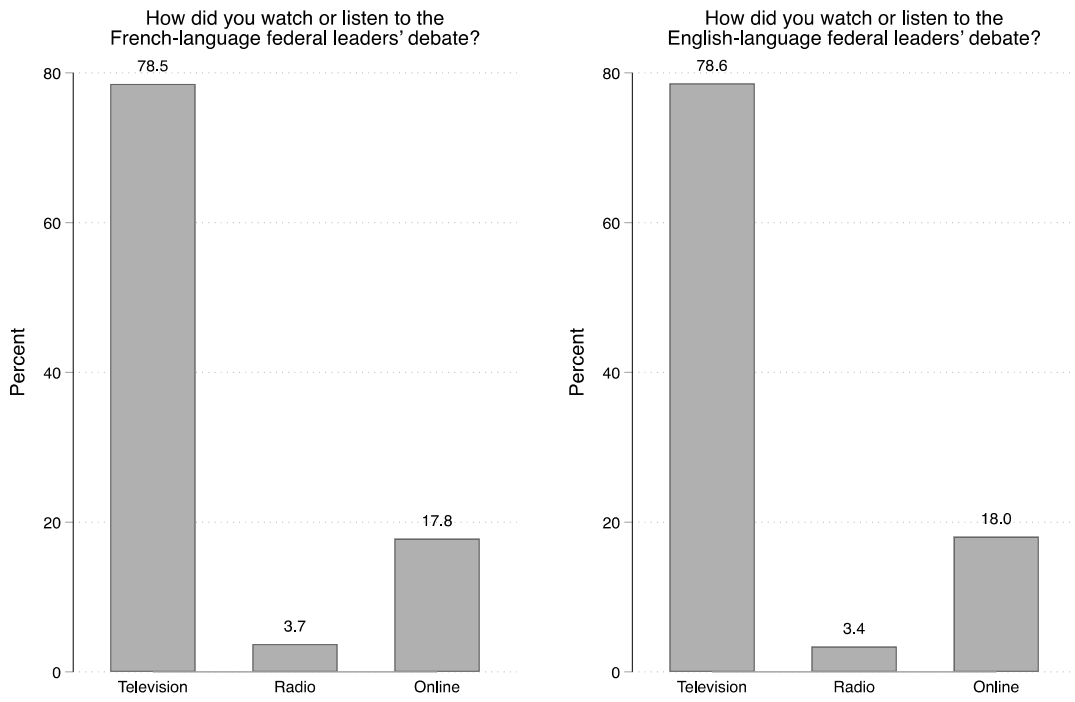


Figure 10: Viewership medium, by debate. *Note: survey responses are unweighted.*

Reasons for not watching the debates

For those who indicated they *did not* watch a debate, we probed further—asking what was the main reason they did not watch. Figure 11 reports the answers for non-watchers of the French debate and Figure 12 reports the same for non-watchers of the English debate.

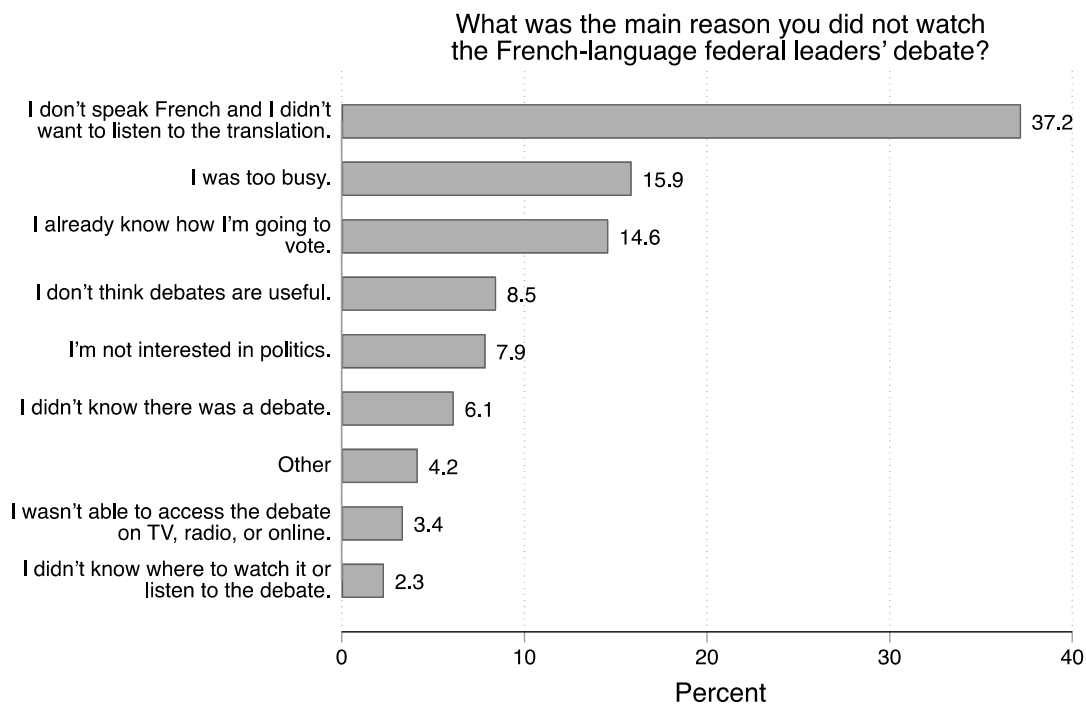


Figure 11: Reasons for not watching the French debate. *Note: survey responses are unweighted.*

The most common answer for not watching the French debate was that the participant did not speak French and didn't want to listen to the translation—perhaps not surprising given that this question was put to everyone who did not watch the French debate, French- and English- speakers alike. The second most common response was “I was too busy” (16%). Another common set of responses all pertain to a perceive lack of use for the debate or a lack of interest in politics more broadly: “I already know how I’m going to vote” (15%); “I don’t think debates are useful” (8%); and “I’m not interested in politics” (8%). A further, smaller subset of responses reflected a lack of awareness of or access to the debates: “I didn’t know there was a debate” (6%); “I wasn’t able to access the debate” (3%) and “I didn’t know where to watch or listen to the debate” (2%).

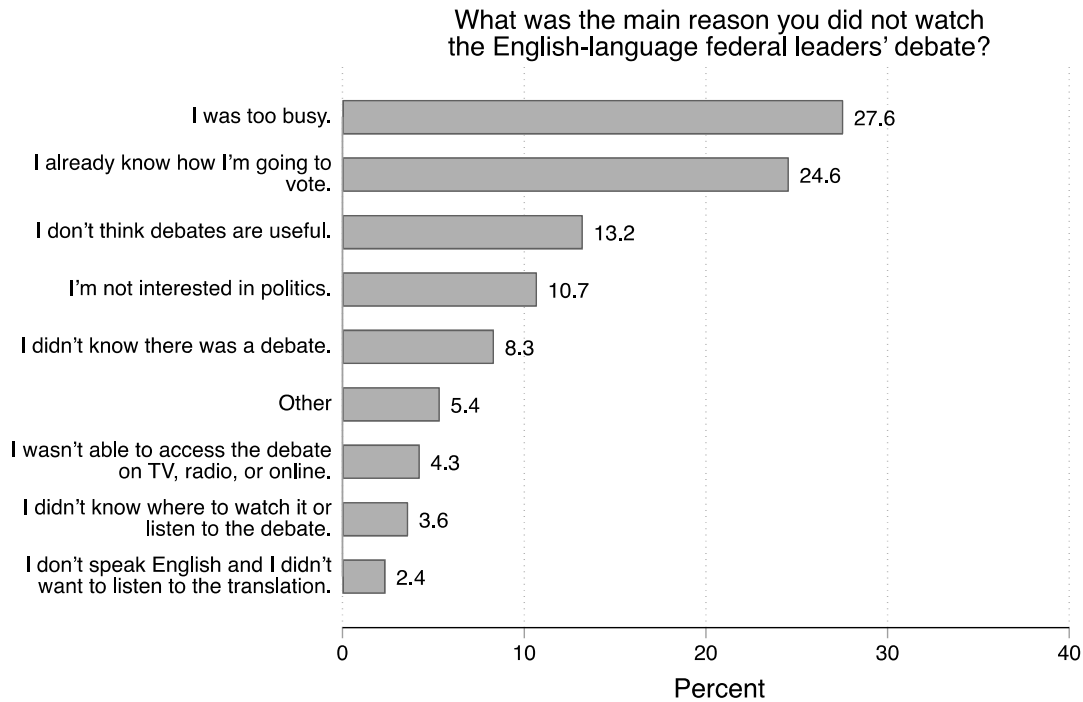


Figure 12: Reasons for not watching the English debate. *Note: survey responses are unweighted.*

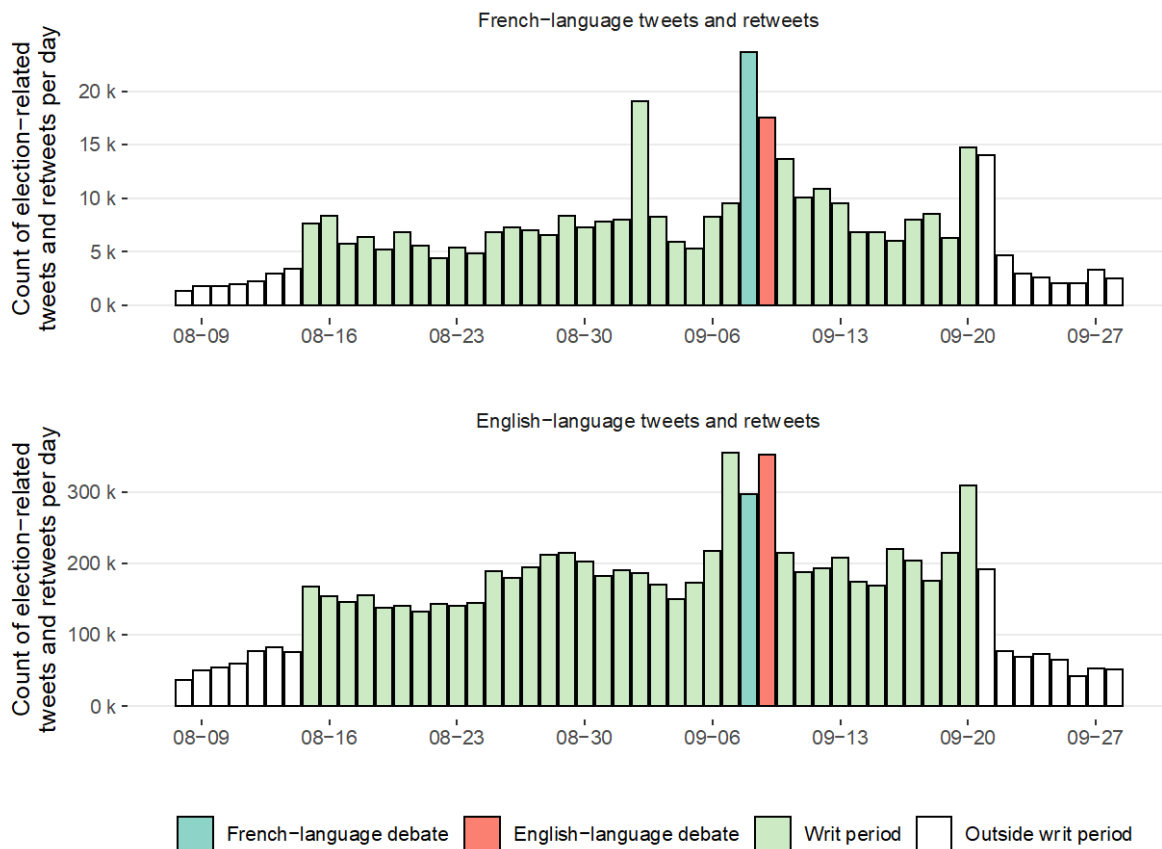
With the exception of the language-based reason, the responses for non-watchers of the English debate largely mirror the responses for non-watchers of the French debate. The most common response (28%) was “I was too busy.” The next most common set of responses again underscored a perceived lack of value or interest in the debate and in politics: “I already know how I’m going to vote” (25%); “I don’t think debates are useful” (13%); and “I’m not interested in politics” (10.7%). Only a small proportion of non-watchers of the English debate attributed not watching to a lack of awareness or access: “I didn’t know there was a debate” (8%); “I wasn’t able to access the debate” (4%) and “I didn’t know where to watch or listen to the debate” (4%).

These results are encouraging in that the reasons for not watching a debate do not typically come down to a technical problem with access: only 5-10% of non-watchers said they didn’t watch because they didn’t have access to the debate or didn’t know how to access the debate. By contrast, a significant proportion attribute not watching to a lack of interest. While there is likely opportunity to convince some of these Canadians of the value of the debates, future viewership will naturally be constrained by individuals’ interest in politics. The response of being “too busy” to watch is more difficult to interpret. For some it could again reflect a lack of interest in the debate, but for others it may reflect irresolvable scheduling conflicts such as work or childcare. This suggests further reflection in terms of when to schedule a debate given Canadian time zones—as well as whether more can be done to promote access to clips of the debates after the fact. (In Section 4.7.6, we take up the question of when Canadians would like to watch a debate live.)

Engagement with the debates

Engagement on Twitter

The leaders' debates were important junctures during the election on Twitter. Figure 13 shows the volume of Canadian-politics related tweets from August 8 to September 28, 2021, with the top panel showing French-language tweets and the bottom panel showing English-language ones. September 8 and 9, when the leaders' debates were held, were among the most concentrated period of discussion of Canadian politics in both languages. The day of the French debate witnessed, by a large margin, the most French-language politics-related Twitter activity of the campaign—substantially outstripping Election Day itself. The day of the English debate had the second highest English-language politics-related Twitter activity of the campaign, again higher than on Election Day.



Based on an analysis of 2.3 million tweets and 6.4 million retweets from August 8 to September 28 that contained an election related keyword or hashtag (e.g. Trudeau, #cdnpoli, #elxn44)

Figure 13: Volume of Canadian politics tweets during the 2021 federal election campaign, with days of the federal leaders' debates highlighted.

In addition, we identified debate-related tweets based on keywords, again using “debate,” “débat,” moderator names, and party leader names. A total of 107,889 debate-related tweets and retweets were posted in the four hours of the two debates: 31,090 during the French-language debate and 76,799 during the English-language debate.

Throughout the election, we identified 84,560 accounts that habitually post about politics and evaluated the extent to which this politically active group also shared their opinions during the leaders’ debates. Figure 14 shows the number and percentage of users who habitually comment on Canadian politics who live-tweeted the debates.

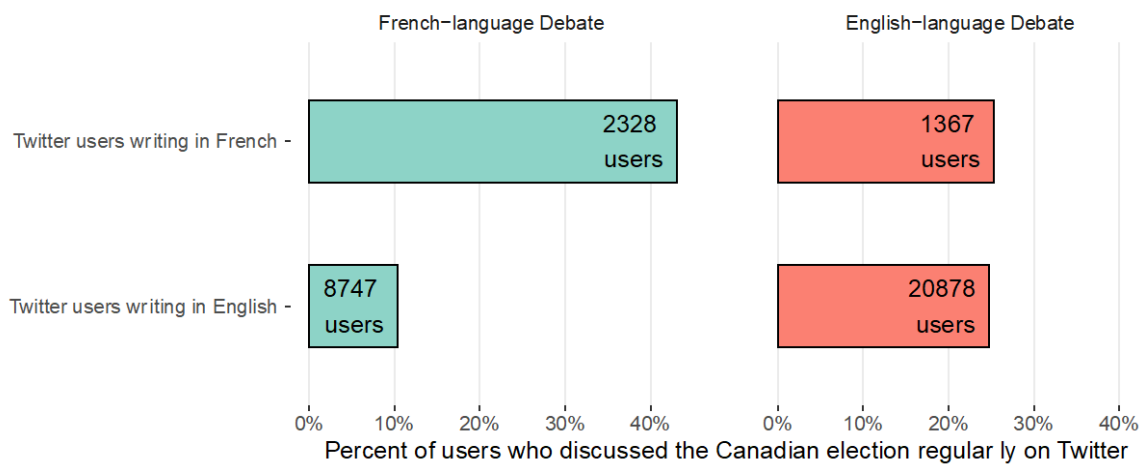


Figure 14: Number of Canadians live tweeting the debates, shown as a percentage of all users identified as regularly discussing the Canadian election on Twitter.

Over 40% of the habitually posting French-language users posted in the two-hour window of the French-language debate, while only about 11% of English-users did so. Just over 25% of both French- and English-language users live tweeted about the English-language debate. The topics and content of these tweets was varied and included cheering on particular party leaders, discussing the debate format and content, and commenting on specific policy areas.

Looking deeper into the debate-related conversation during the two debates on Twitter, we can examine the volume of tweets during and immediately after each debate. Figures 15 and 16 show these results. The debates are divided into their thematic areas based on the time of the tweet—with the bottom plot showing the post-debate analysis and post-debate media scrums with the leaders. The volume of conversation on Twitter increased throughout both the English- and French-language debates. Caution, however, should be taken in attributing changes in tweet volume to changes in debate topic.

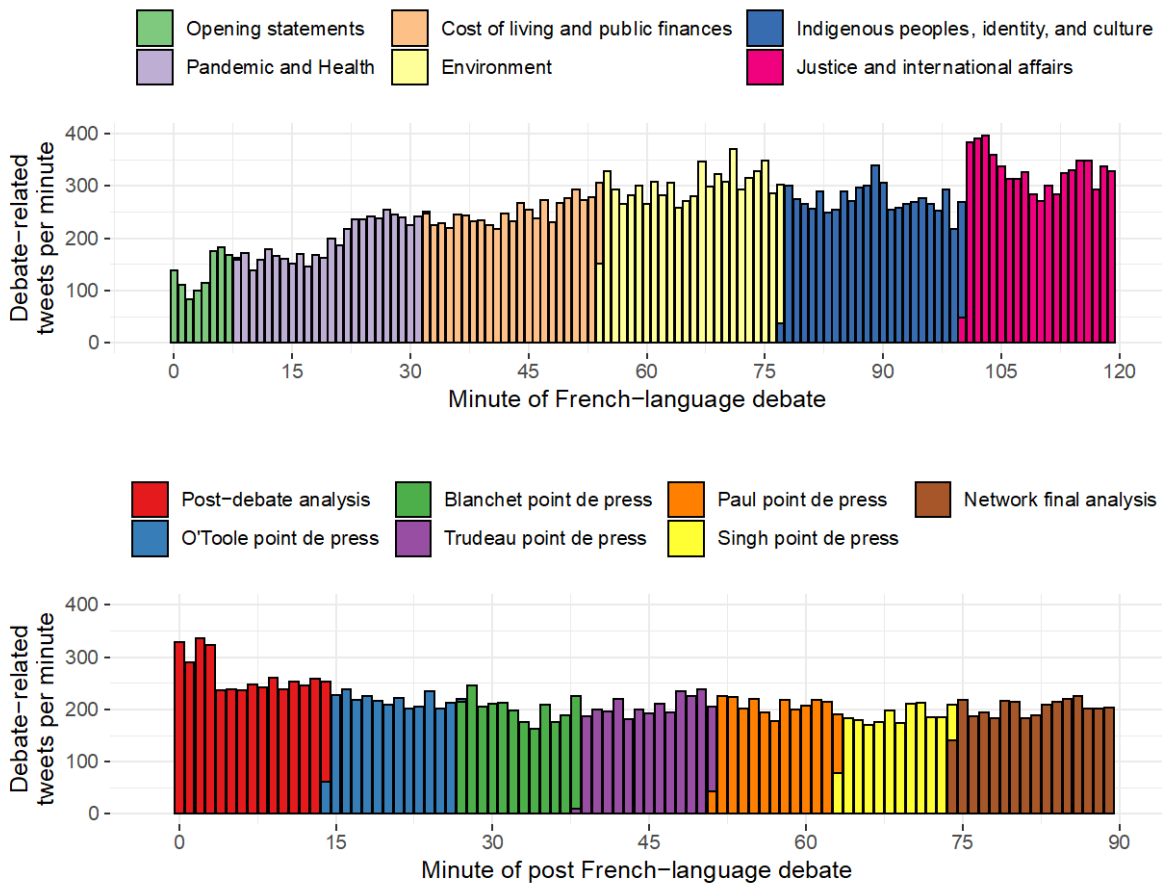


Figure 15: Debate-related Twitter activity during and immediately after the French-language debate.

Figure 16 shows the same volumes for the English-language debate and immediate post-debate period. Volume was more steady throughout the debate, but fell off after the debate. Starting the English-language debate at 9 pm Eastern—an hour later than the French-language debate—may have contributed to this drop of interest, with the number of debate-related tweets falling to approximately 250 per minute during the last press conferences of the evening.

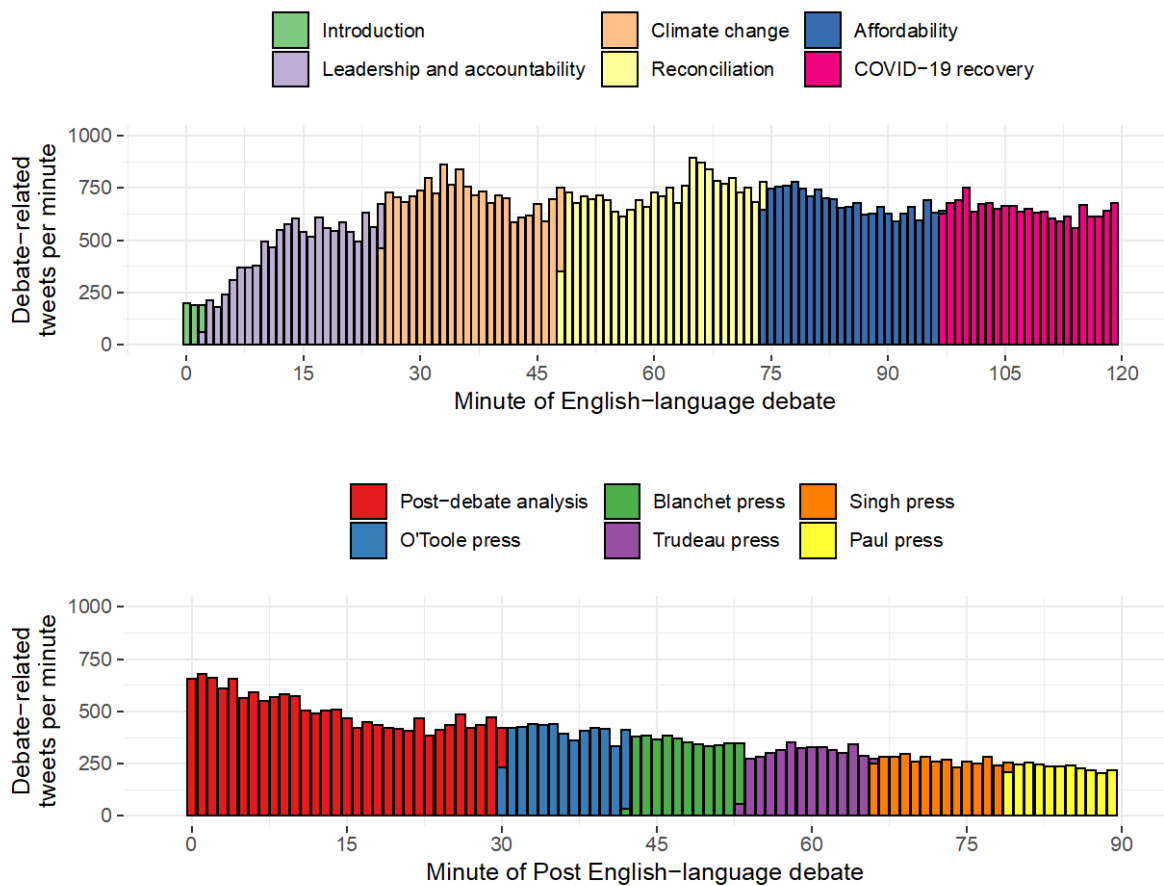


Figure 16: Debate-related Twitter activity during and immediately after the English-language debate.

Discussion of debates with others

In the second wave of the survey, all participants—regardless of whether they had watched a debate—were asked whether they had discussed what happened in each debate with others. Participants were also asked, again for each debate, whether they commented on social media about what happened in the debate. The results are presented in Figure 17, disaggregated by debate viewership. These results highlight a healthy degree of engagement with the debates after the fact: nearly half (47%) of French debate viewers discussed what happened with others and nearly two in five (39%) of English debate viewers did the same. Online engagement was more modest but still encouraging: 23% of French debate viewers and 12% of English debate viewers commented about the respective debate online. Engagement among nonviewers (right column) is much more limited: less than 5% of non-viewers discussed the debates or commented about them online.

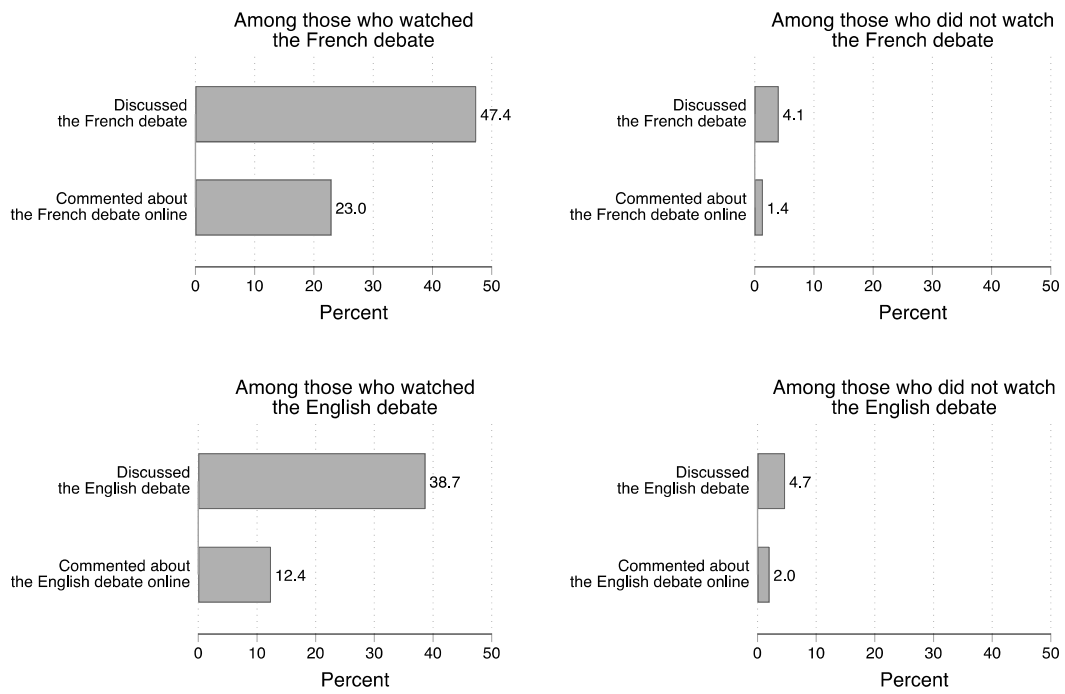


Figure 17: Debate discussion, by debate viewership. *Note: survey responses are unweighted.*

Evaluations of the debates

Survey-based evaluations

When participants in the second wave reported watching a Commission-organized debate, we followed up with a series of questions meant to elicit their opinions about a wide range of aspects of the debate. Participants were asked to indicate whether they strongly disagreed, somewhat disagreed, somewhat agreed, or strongly agreed with a set of 11 statements about the debate. Figure 18 reports the results for French debate viewers in the form of the percent in agreement with each statement (i.e., combining those who somewhat or strongly agreed).

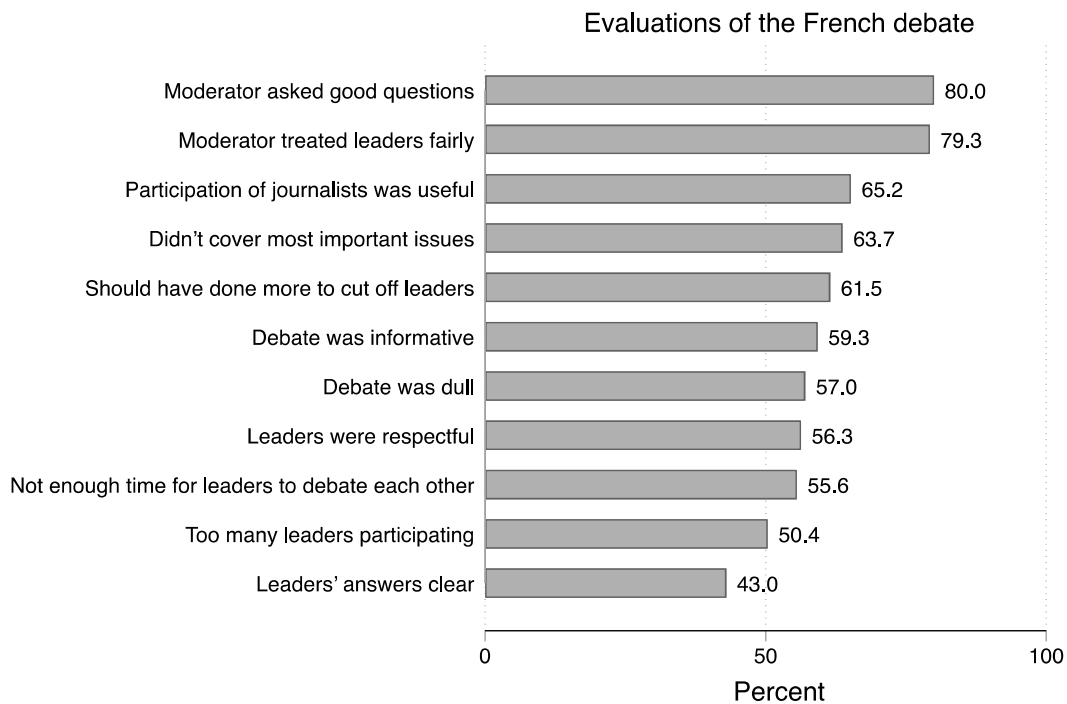


Figure 18: Percentage in agreement with statements about various aspects of the French debate.

Note: survey responses are unweighted.

French debate viewers gave generally high marks to the moderator. Large majorities felt that he asked good questions (80%) and treated the leaders fairly (79%). Furthermore, nearly 2 in 3 (65%) French debate viewers thought that the participation of the additional journalists was useful. The chief reservation with respect to the moderation was in terms of managing the leaders' speaking time: 62% said that the moderator "should have done more to cut off leaders when it was warranted" and 56% felt there wasn't enough time for the leaders to "debate each other directly." Managing leaders' speaking time is a thorny issue, one to which we return in Section 4.7. We also note here the recurring

frustration that focus group participants experienced when trying to follow exchanges in which leaders talked over each other.

With regards to general judgments of the debate and its format, roughly 3 in 5 (59%) French debate viewers found the debate informative. At the same time, a slightly smaller fraction (57%) characterized the debate as “dull”. Fully 64% reported that the debate “didn’t cover the issues that were most important” to them. French debate viewers were more evenly split (50%) on another crucial format question—namely whether there were “too many leaders participating in the debate.” (We unpack in detail Canadians’ preferences with respect to leader participation in Section 4.7).

Lastly, French debate viewers gave the party leaders a mixed scorecard. A majority (56%) found the leaders to be “respectful of each other.” Less than half of viewers (43%) felt that leaders’ answers were “clear.” This maps onto a common concern of focus group participants who, upon viewing clips of the debate, found that leaders’ answers lacked detail.

Figure 19 reports the results for English debate viewers. The judgments of English debate viewers mirror those of French debate viewers. Again, top marks are reserved for the moderator and participating journalists. Large majorities believed that the moderator asked good questions (77%) and treated leaders fairly (76%). In addition, over three quarters (76%) of viewers found the participation of the additional journalists useful. Similar to the French debate, however, roughly 3 in 5 viewers (59%) thought that the moderator should have done more to “cut off” leaders—while a majority (57%) felt that the moderator “didn’t give the leaders enough time to debate each other directly.”

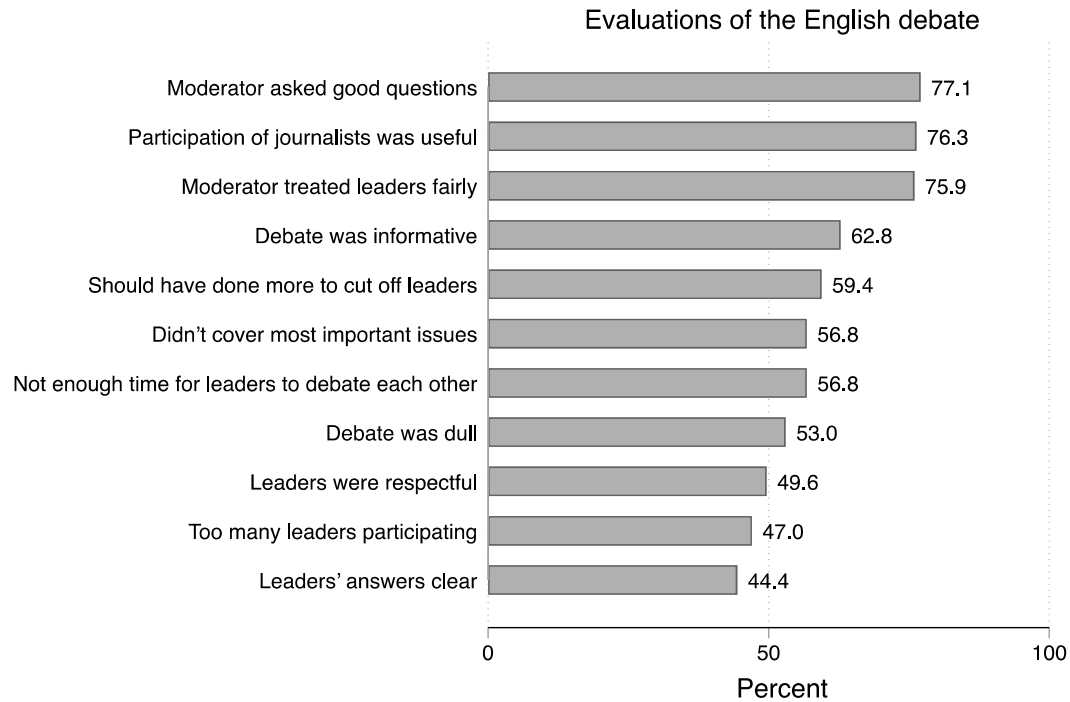


Figure 19: Percentage in agreement with statements about various aspects of the English debate.

Note: survey responses are unweighted.

On the debate and its format, 63% of English debate viewers agreed that the debate was “informative.” A smaller number (53%) also characterized the debate as “dull.” As with the French debate, a majority of viewers (57%) still felt that the debate “didn’t cover the issues that were most important” to them. Viewers were split on the question of leader participation—with 47% agreeing with the statement that there were “too many leaders participating in the debate.”

The party leaders were also given lukewarm reviews by English debate viewers. Half (50%) characterized their conduct during the debate as “respectful” and under half (44%) characterized their answers as “clear.”

To supplement these assessments of specific aspects of the debate, we also asked participants to rate the debates more generally on a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 meant “a very bad debate” and 10 meant “a very good debate.” We put this question not only to participants who watched the debate but also to those who did not—provided that they had read, seen, or heard at least some news or commentary about what happened in the debate. Figure 20 reports, for each debate, the average debate rating (on the 0 to 10 scale) for three different types of survey participants: (1) those who watched the debate but did not consume news or commentary about it; (2) those who watched the debate and consumed at

least some news or commentary about it; and (3) those who did not watch the debate but did consume at least some news or commentary about it.

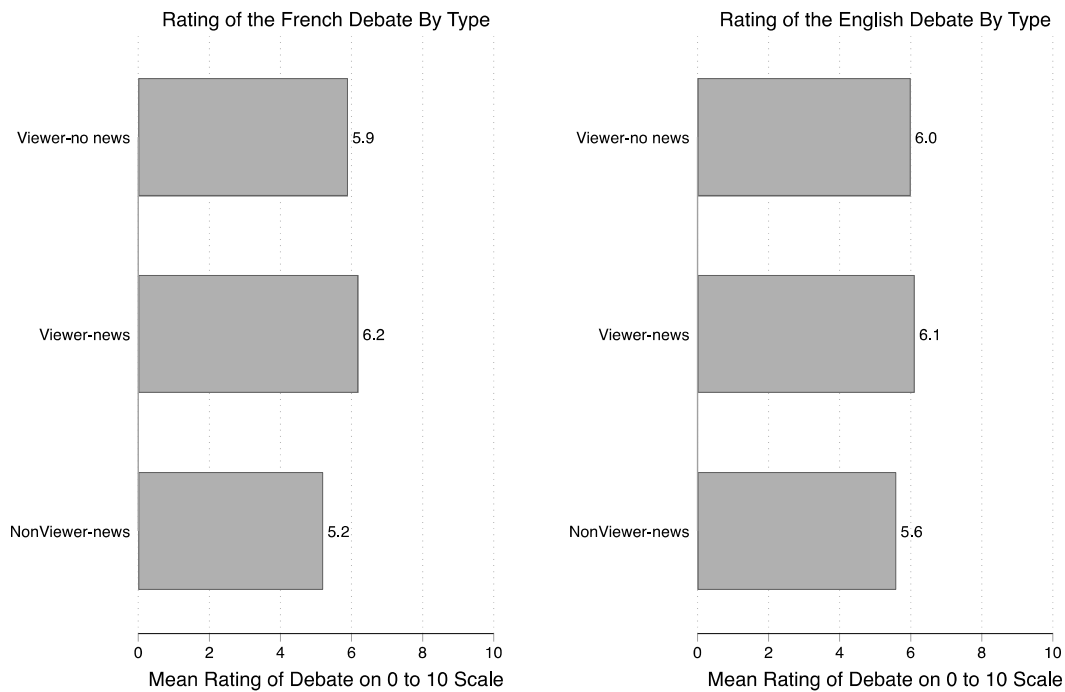


Figure 20: General rating of each debate (0-“a very bad debate” to 10-“a very good debate”), by participant type. Note: survey responses are unweighted. “Viewer-no news” refers to those who watched the debate but did not consume news or commentary about it; “Viewer-news” refers to those who watched the debate and consumed at least some news or commentary about it; and “NonViewer-news” refers to those who did not watch the debate but did consume at least some news or commentary about it.

Viewers of each debate typically gave the debate a moderately positive rating—with the average rating hovering near 6 on the 0 to 10 scale. Participants who *did not* see the debate but *did* consume news or commentary had a somewhat less favourable assessment. Indeed, in the case of both the French and English debates, debate viewers who consumed news had a statistically significantly more positive assessment than non-viewers who consumed news (debate viewers who consumed no news about the debate constituted only a small fraction of the sample and thus their average rating should be interpreted with caution). While this finding is only suggestive, the difference in assessments between viewers and nonviewers implies that the act of actually watching a debate—rather than merely consuming news or commentary about it after the fact—may be associated with more favourable views of the debate.

Twitter-based evaluations

Next, we turn to a sentiment-based analysis of the Twitter conversation during and in the immediate aftermath of the debates. Figure 21 shows the overall sentiment of tweets related to both the French-language debate (top panel) and English-language debate (bottom panel). Sentiment related to both remained close to the neutral position (0.5), with the most noticeable trend being a more negative sentiment in the tweets in the post-French language debate.

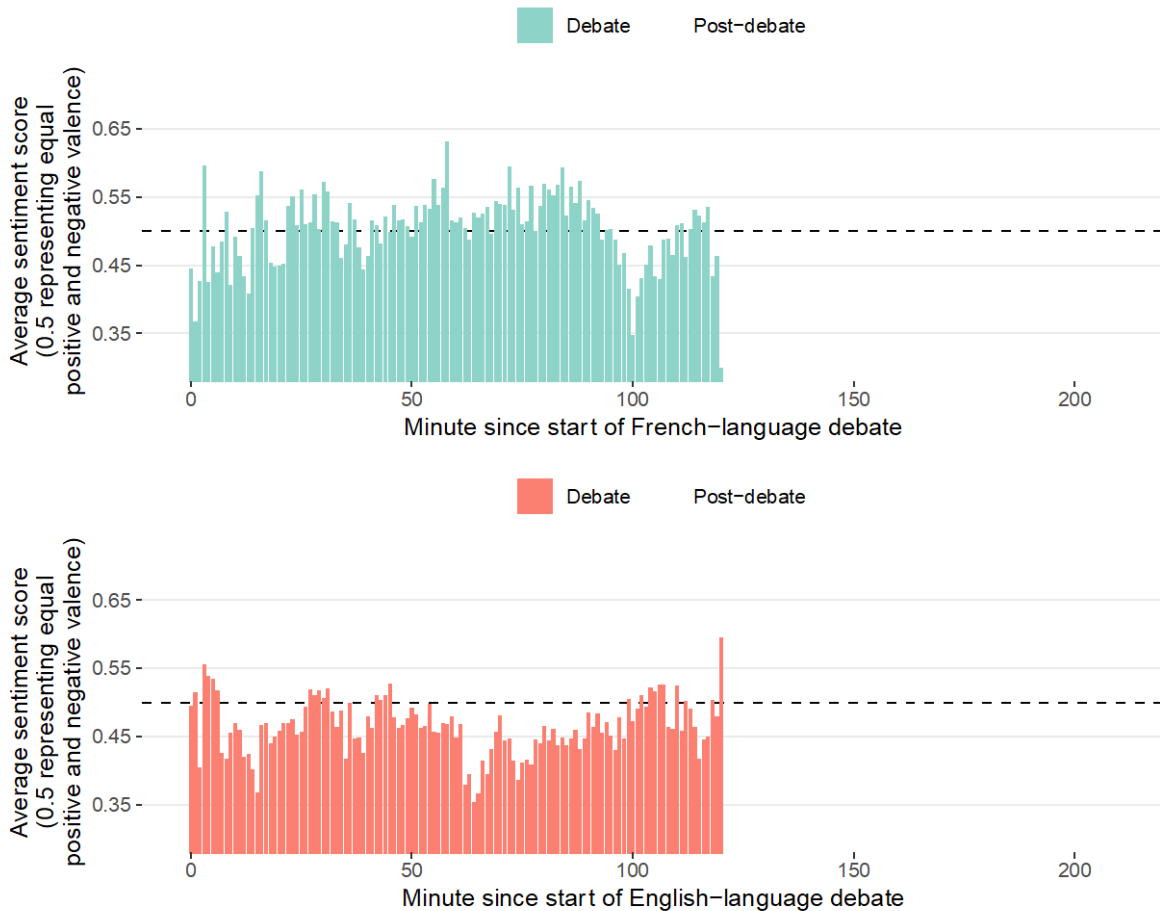


Figure 21: Sentiment of debate-related tweets during and immediately after the two leaders' debates.

We use a similar sentiment methodology to examine specific themes of discussion. Figure 22 shows overall sentiment for a variety of election-related hashtags, as well as for mentions of the debate moderators. The sentiment dictionary employed here correctly identifies positive and negative hashtags, with anti-Trudeau and anti-Conservative Party hashtags having overall negative sentiment and pro-Liberal, pro-Conservative, and pro-NDP hashtags having overall positive sentiment. The debate-

related themes are those with the darkest bars and they fall between the pro- and anti-hashtags, with overall sentiment at approximately 0.5—a neutral position. Tweets mentioning the moderator of the French-language debate were somewhat more positive than the moderator of the English-language debate, although the English-language debate hashtag was slightly more positive than the French-language one.

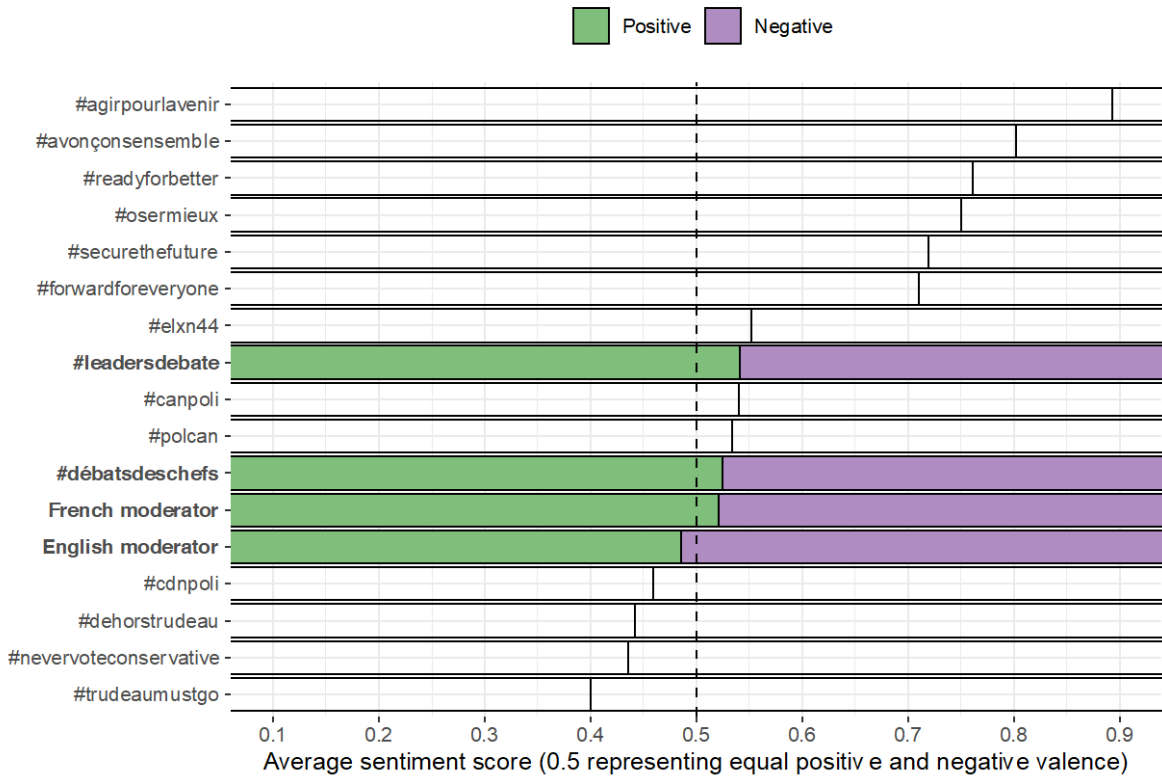


Figure 22: Sentiment evaluation of debate hashtags in comparison to popular Canadian politics hashtags.

The impact of watching the debates

In this section, we explore the impact of watching the debates on a wide variety of political outcomes—from engagement to knowledge to behaviour. We did this by recontacting a portion of participants from the Wave 1 pre-debate survey and administering the same set of questions in the Wave 2 post-debate survey. In this way, we can compute the within-individual differences, if any, in these outcomes. Moreover, by comparing these within-individual differences between those who did—and did not—watch a debate, we gain important leverage on the question of how watching the debates impacted these various outcomes. Details on the methodology used to estimate debate impacts can be found in Section 3.1.1.

On political engagement

We begin by exploring the impact of debate watching on six outcomes designed to capture engagement with the election and with politics more generally. Figure 23 reports, for each of the six outcomes, the model predictions for those who watched at least one Commission-organized debate and for those who did not watch any Commission-organized debates—along with the 95% confidence intervals associated with each model prediction.

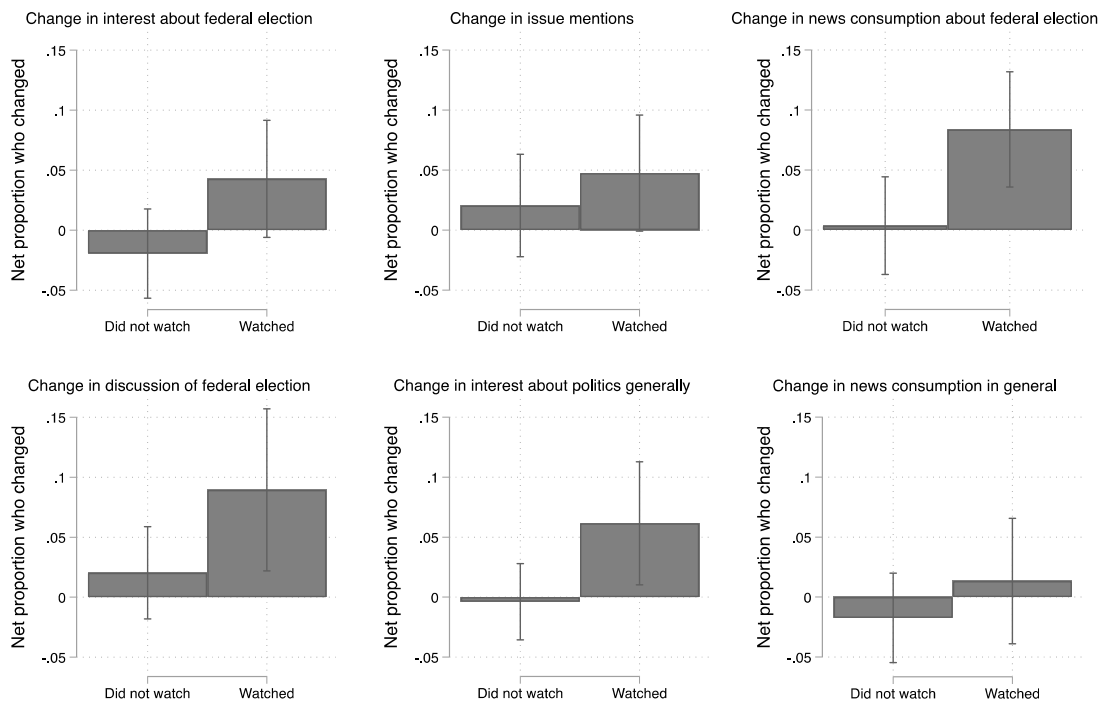


Figure 23: Impact of debate viewership on political engagement outcomes. *Note: survey responses are weighted.*

We make three findings. First, watching a debate was associated with an increase in interest in the federal election. Compared to individuals who did not watch, those who watched a debate had a 6 percentage point greater net increase in self-reported election interest. Second, debate watching was associated with an increase in the consumption of news about the federal election. Those who watched a debate had an 8 percentage point greater net increase in self-reported election news consumption than those who did not watch. Third, debate watching sparked greater interest in politics more generally. Compared to non-watchers, the debate watchers experienced a 6 percentage point net increase in self-reported general political interest. Furthermore, debate watching appears to have also contributed to greater discussion of the federal election—although the difference between watchers and non-watchers only approaches the conventional level of statistical significance ($p = .08$).

We did not find statistically significant evidence that debate watching was associated with more frequent “issue mentions” (i.e., listing more issues of interest in the election) or a greater volume of news consumption generally. On balance, these findings suggest that the debates did succeed in stimulating greater political engagement among those who watched them.

On political knowledge

Next, we turn to the question of whether watching a debate led to greater political knowledge. In Figure 24, we examine this from three perspectives. First, we investigated knowledge of party promises. Participants were given a set of 10 campaign promises (two for each of the parties participating in the Commission-organized debates) and were asked to identify which party, if any, made the promise. Second, we explored knowledge of current economic and social conditions with a series of four factual questions about the federal deficit, the unemployment rate, greenhouse gas emissions, and home prices. Third, we investigated participants’ self-reported confidence that they knew “enough to make a good voting decision” in the election.

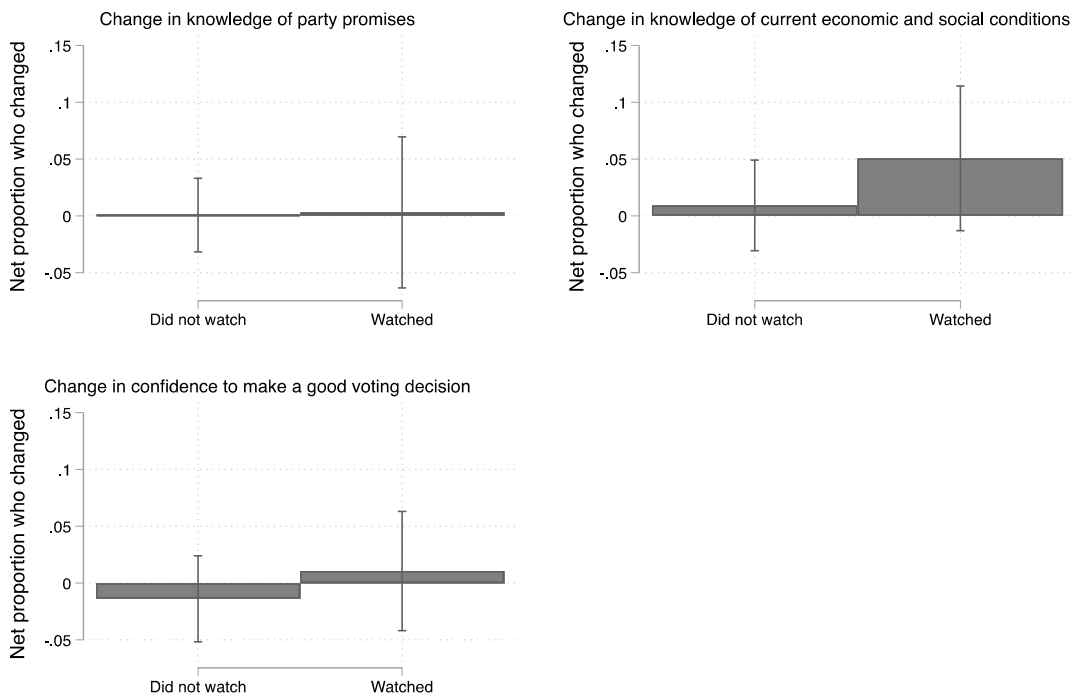


Figure 24: Impact of debate viewership on political knowledge outcomes. *Note: survey responses are weighted.*

We find no evidence that the debate had an impact on these three knowledge outcomes. While watching a debate, for example, is associated with a net increase in knowledge of current conditions, the difference between watchers and non-watchers is not statistically significant. One possible explanation for the absence of debate impacts here is that the debates did not elicit the kind of factual information that was designed to be tapped by the party promise questions or the economic and social condition questions. Furthermore, many participants already self-reported relatively high confidence in their ability to make a good voting decision.

Next, we dig further into participants' political knowledge by assessing their ability—or willingness—to evaluate the parties and their leaders. To do so, we constructed four outcomes. First, we built an index of participants' ability to rate key traits of each of the five participating party leaders. Participants could indicate yes, no, or unsure in each instance. This index counted the number of instances in which a participant gave either a yes or no answer—that is, when they did *not* answer unsure. Second, we constructed an index to capture participants' ability to rate all five participating leaders on a 0-100 feeling thermometer scale. Here participants could rate each leader or indicate that they "Don't know the leader." We thus computed, for each participant, whether or not they rated all five leaders. Third, we constructed an index of participants' ability to rate the five participating parties on a 0 to 100 feeling thermometer scale. Similar to the leader feeling thermometers, the party feeling thermometers allowed participants to either give a score or to tick "Don't know / Prefer not to answer." Thus, we

computed—again for each participant—whether or not they rated all five parties. Fourth, we conducted a similar exercise with respect to participants’ ability to place all five parties along the conventional left-right spectrum of political ideology. Here again participants had the option of ticking “unsure” for each party. We computed whether participants placed all five parties along this left-right continuum.

Figure 25 reports the model predictions for the change in each of these four indexes—again for both watchers and non-watchers. We find that debate watching had a statistically significant positive impact on the ability to rate all five leaders using the 0 to 100 feeling thermometer. More specifically, those who watched a debate experienced a 9 percentage point greater increase in net ability to rate the favourability of the leaders—compared to those who did not watch. We do not find statistically significant differences with respect to the other three indexes: the ability to evaluate leaders’ traits, the ability to rate the favourability of all five parties, or the ability to place all five parties along the left-right ideological spectrum.

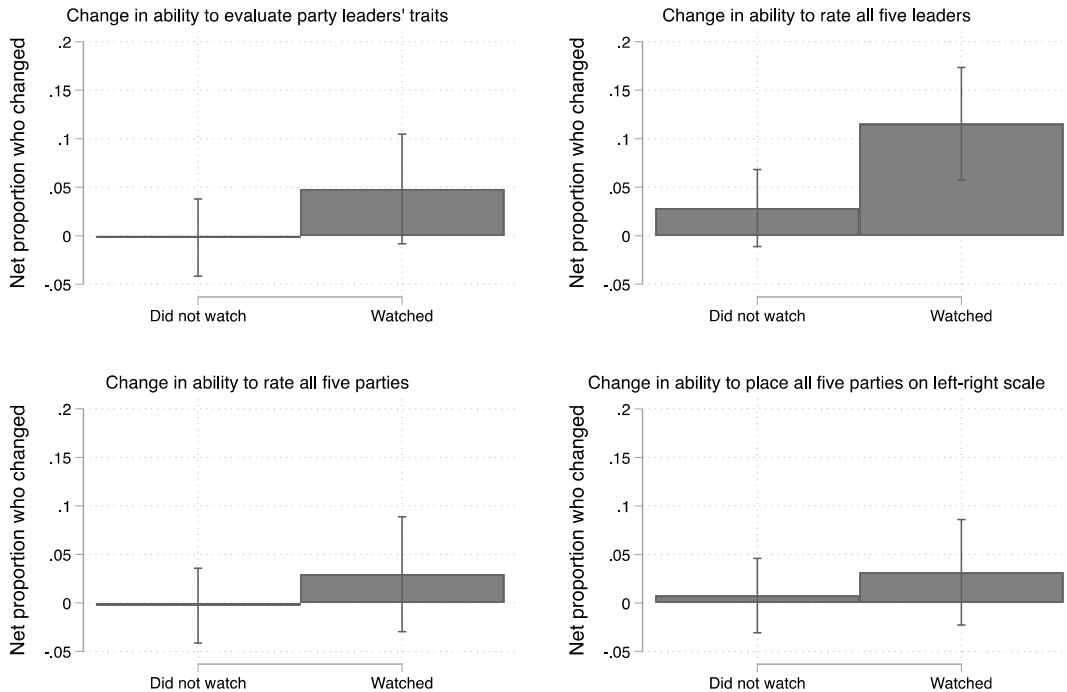


Figure 25: Impact of debate viewership on ability to rate the parties and their leaders. *Note: survey responses are weighted.*

In sum, our analysis did not find debate impacts in the form of knowledge of party promises or factual knowledge about current conditions—nor with respect to participants’ ability to rate or situate the parties. We did, however, find some evidence that debate watching led to participant learning about the party *leaders*: specifically, debate watchers were better able than non-watchers to rate their favourability toward all five participating party leaders. This greater familiarity with the party leaders is

notable in that prior research shows that leader evaluations are an important ingredient in voting behaviour. Thus, in our judgment, the question is not whether debates contributed to greater political knowledge: we find that they do. Rather, the question is how best to optimize learning. For example, how can debates be designed in ways to provide the most useful information to Canadians in a short period of time? We turn in Section 4.7 to examining how Canadians' preferences for various debate formats could inform such a design.

On political evaluations

Next, we investigate the influence of debates on citizens' assessments of the leaders and their parties. This serves as a companion to the preceding exploration of Canadians' ability/willingness to rate and place the leaders and their parties. Here we construct four outcome measures. The first three simply capture the within-individual changes in ratings and placements *conditional on giving a rating or placement*. More specifically, for each participant, we computed (1) the mean absolute difference across the five leader feeling thermometers; (2) the mean absolute difference across the five party feeling thermometers; and (3) the mean absolute difference across the five party left-right ideological placement scales. The fourth measure captures participants' belief about which party was "best at addressing" what they considered to be the most important issue in the election. The measure is thus a simple binary indicator of whether a participant selected a different party in the post-debate second wave than they did in the pre-debate first wave. In short, the four measures capture the degree to which Canadians changed their views of the leaders and parties—without specifying the direction of that change. The results are compiled in Figure 26.

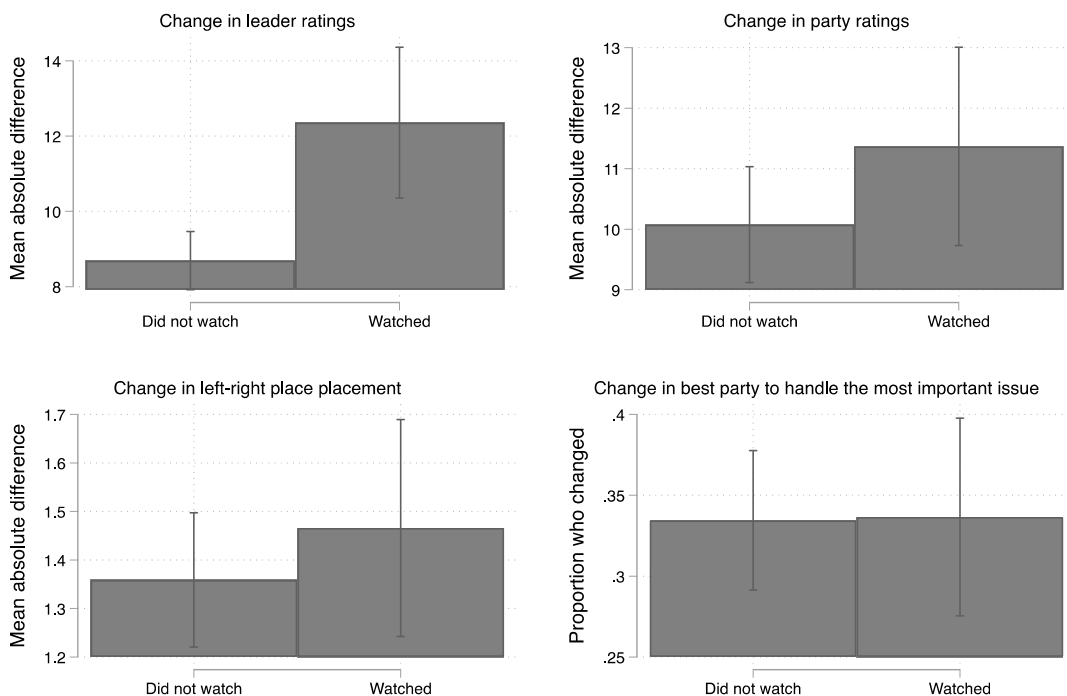


Figure 26: Impact of debate viewership on political evaluation outcomes. *Note: survey responses are weighted.*

We find that debate viewership contributed to greater change in the leader feeling thermometer ratings. The typical non-watcher updated their mean rating of the leaders by 9 points (recall that the original rating scale was 0 to 100). By contrast, the typical watcher updated their mean leader rating by 12 points, a statistically significant difference. We do not find statistically significant differences between watchers and non-watchers for the other three measures: namely, with respect to party ratings, party left-right ideological placements, or the party believed to best handle the most important issue.

On institutional evaluations

Turning to institutional evaluations, we examine the possible impacts of the debates on participants' self-reported political efficacy and satisfaction with Canadian democracy—as well as the degree to which they trust key political institutions like the courts, the federal government, the media, and political parties.

The results are reported in Figure 27. We find evidence that the debates had a positive impact on trust in the federal government. Compared to those who did not watch, debate watchers experienced a 10 percentage point greater net increase in trust in the federal government. We also find some evidence of greater increases in trust in the media and trust in political parties among watchers—again relative to non-watchers—though this difference only approaches the conventional level of statistical significance (in the case of both outcomes, $p = .07$). We do not find evidence that debate watching contributed to increases in political efficacy, satisfaction with Canadian democracy, or trust in the courts.

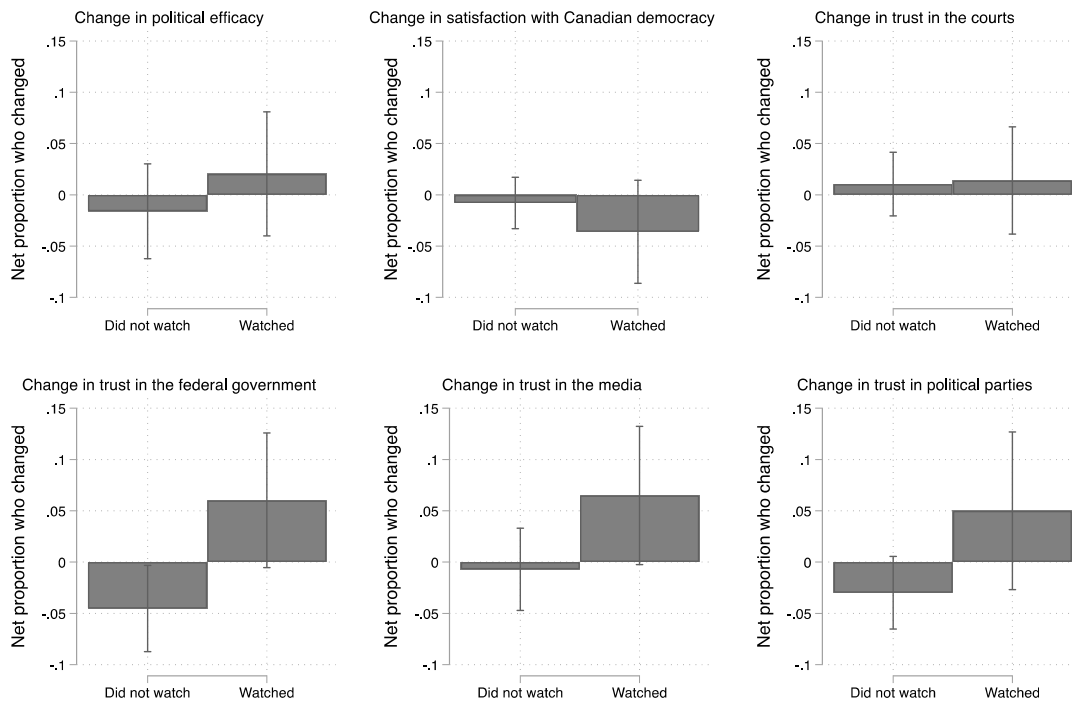


Figure 27: Impact of debate viewership on institutional evaluation outcomes. *Note: survey responses are weighted.*

The fact that debate watching contributed to increased trust in the federal government, and possibly also to increased trust in the media and political parties, is notable and worth considering further. Indeed, one would not necessarily expect that exposure to the often combative and partisan atmosphere of a debate would build public trust. One possible explanation, however, is that seeing the leaders, including the prime minister, subject to questioning and compelled to explain themselves serves to engender greater trust. Future research should go deeper on this question of trust, exploring what particular features of debates help build Canadians’ confidence in their political institutions.

On political behaviour

The last set of outcomes we explore concern political behaviour—specifically in terms of 2021 turnout intention and vote choice, as well as participants’ expectations about their future non-voting forms of political participation. These are reported in Figure 28. We do not find evidence that debate watching was associated with changes in these behaviours at conventional levels of statistical significance.

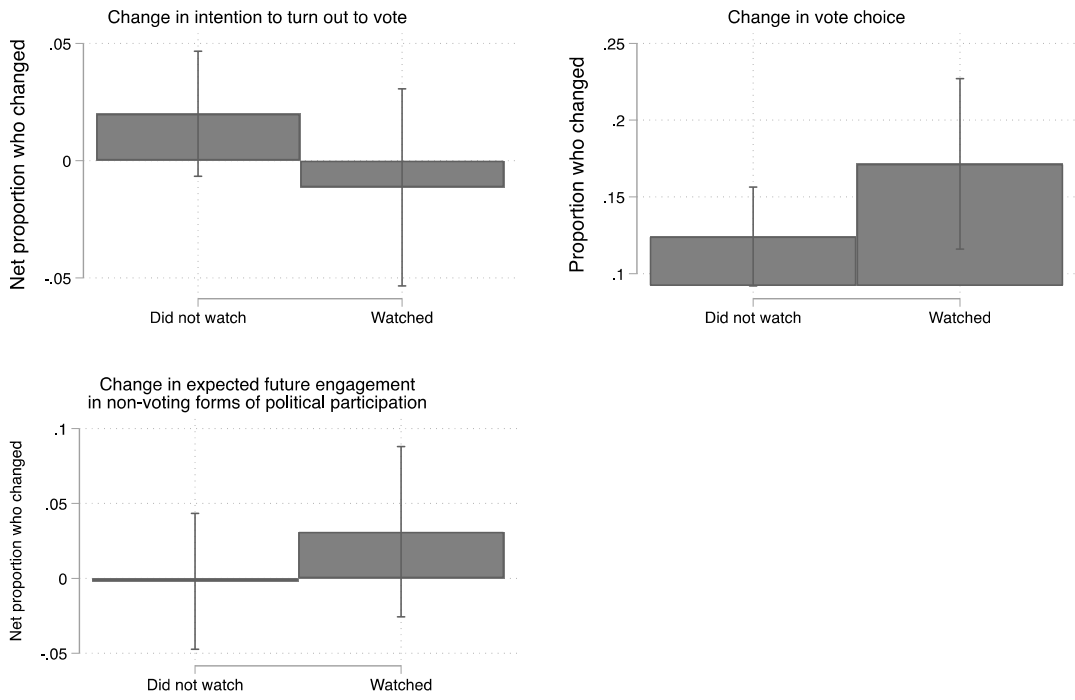


Figure 28: Impact of debate viewership on political behaviour. *Note: survey responses are weighted.*

Public preferences for future debates

In this section, we turn to investigating Canadians' preferences for future debates. To estimate these preferences, we administered a third survey to a fresh cross-section of just under 500 Canadians. The survey elicited views across a wide range of issues—ranging from who should participate in the debates to how the debates should be moderated to the appeal of various different types of debates and public events. These preferences were gauged in a variety of ways: for example, by asking participants to rank their goals, to make trade-offs between debate formats, and to allocate a time budget within a given debate. What emerges, we believe, is the most comprehensive picture available of Canadians' preferences for leaders' debates.

Goals of leaders' debates

We begin our exploration of Canadians' preferences from first principles: by asking participants to rank their top three goals from a pre-established set of possible goals for a leaders' debate. Half of the sample was randomly assigned to a prompt that asked them to rank the top three that were "most important to you personally," while the other half was randomly assigned to a prompt that asked them to rank the top three that they thought were "most important to Canadian democracy." In this way, we gain a window into whether Canadians' personal goals for leaders' debates differ from how they think the public interest should be served by the debates.

The results are presented in Figure 29. We report the percentage of participants who ranked the given objective as their top goal. The results are disaggregated by whether the participant was prompted to think about what was important to them personally (left) and what was important to Canadian democracy (right).

Percentage who list the following as their top-ranked goal for a leaders' debate

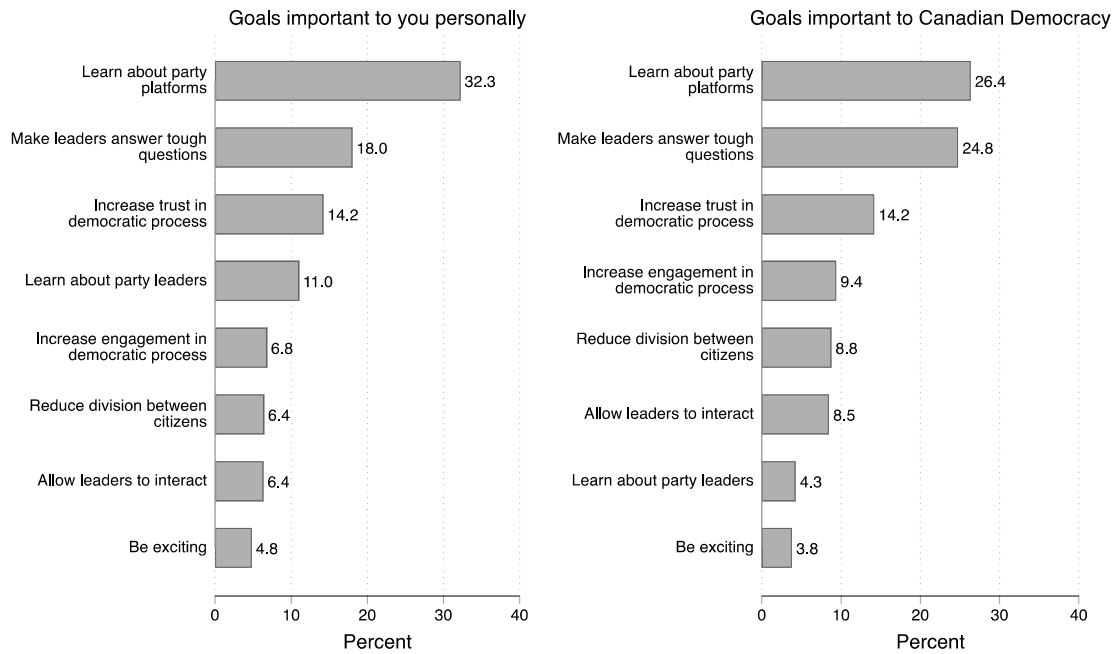


Figure 29: Top-ranked goals for a leaders' debate. *Note: survey responses are weighted.*

We highlight four findings. First, the most common top-ranked goal was to “Help citizens learn about the parties’ platforms and promises.” Roughly one-third (32%) of those in the “goals important to you personally” condition ranked this as their top goal, as did just over one-quarter (26%) of those in the “goals important to Canadian democracy” condition. Notably, however, not all learning goals were considered equal: far fewer participants in each condition identified helping “citizens learn about the party leaders” as their top ranked goal.

Second, the next most common top-ranked goal was to “Make party leaders answer tough questions.” This was again the case regardless of question prompt. Debates as an exercise of accountability features prominently in Canadians’ preferences. Third, a sizeable fraction of participants sought a debate that served to “Increase citizens’ trust in the democratic process”—the third most common top-ranked debate goal (14% in each condition). We noted in Section 4.6.4 evidence that the 2021 debates did increase some forms of institutional trust—despite, or perhaps because, they at times incentivized conflict and opposition. We believe that further research can help inform debate designs that serve to make leaders answer difficult questions while still building trust in the democratic process.

Fourth, we highlight that ‘debate as entertainment’ holds little appeal for citizens. Less than 5% of participants reported that their top-ranked goal was for a debate to be “exciting.” Similarly, relatively

few citizens identified seeing the leaders interact as a key goal of a debate. This comparatively low priority for interaction as such mirrors the recurring distaste of focus group participants for debate segments that allowed the leaders to talk over each other. While debates provide a rare opportunity for leaders to interact, the results here imply that Canadians do not find this interaction an especially desirable end in itself. Nevertheless, leader interaction can still be put in service of other goals—such as promoting learning about party platforms and holding leaders accountable—provided that it is done in a manner that ensures that leaders speak only one at a time.

Leader participation

Next, we turn to examining citizens’ preferences for leader participation within the context of a single debate. Canada has many political parties and deciding which party leaders to invite to a debate is necessarily a judgment call that is, understandably, a source of political contestation. We explored Canadians’ preferences first using a series of four binary choice questions. For each question, participants are presented with two hypothetical debates and asked to choose which they prefer.

The results are reported in Figure 30. Two findings stand out. First, when presented with a hypothetical debate in which the leaders of the “six largest parties are invited to participate - and each leader has less time to speak” and a hypothetical debate in which the leaders of the “two largest parties are invited to participate - and each leader has more time to speak,” 62% of participants chose the former. It is worth underscoring that this choice was made in full knowledge of the likely trade-off: namely, that more leaders would mean less time for each leader to speak.

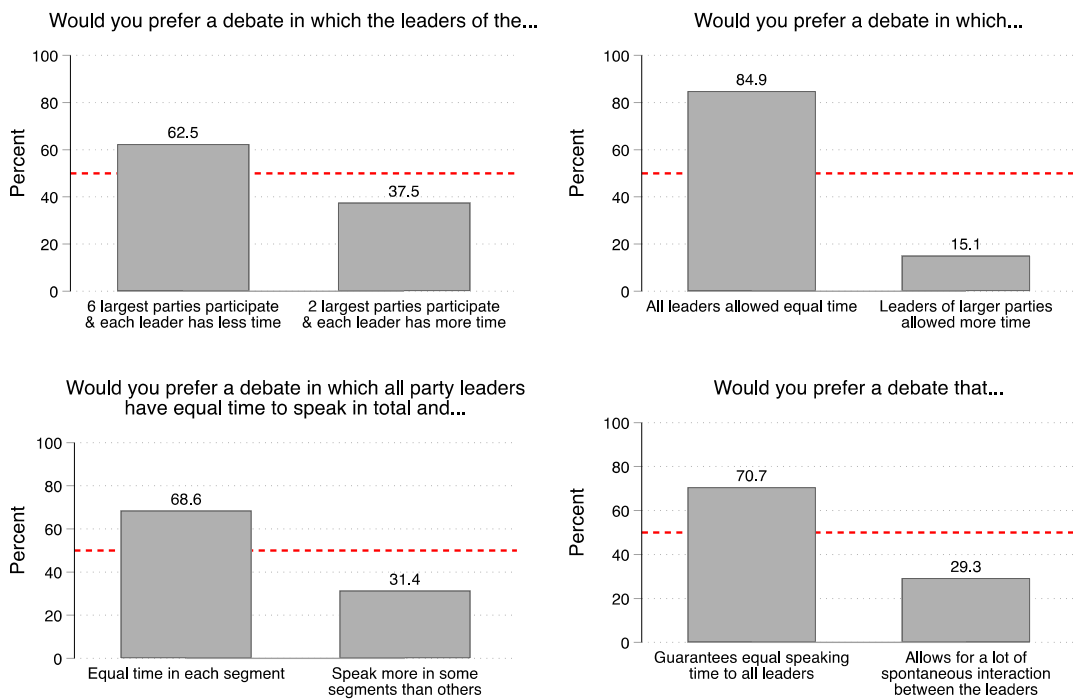


Figure 30: Binary preferences regarding leader participation. *Note: survey responses are weighted.*

Second, participants strongly preferred—at least in the abstract—an equal allocation of speaking time between those leaders who are invited to participate in a debate. A very large majority (85%) preferred a debate in which all leaders were allocated equal time to a debate in which the leaders of the larger parties received more speaking time than the leaders of the smaller parties. This preference for equal treatment holds not simply for the debate as a whole: a large majority (67%) preferred a debate in which all leaders have equal time in each segment to a debate in which the leaders speak more in some segments than others—even though, by construction, both options were presented as providing equal time in total to the leaders. Furthermore, another large majority of Canadians appears willing to trade spontaneity for equal time: 71% favoured a debate that “guarantees equal speaking time to all leaders - even though this means only a little time for spontaneous interaction between the leaders” to a debate that “allows for a lot of spontaneous interaction between the leaders - even though this means they may not have equal speaking time.”

We further probed Canadians’ preferences for how time should be allocated between party leaders by making the available choices more concrete. Elsewhere in the survey, participants were asked to imagine that they were responsible for organizing one, two-hour debate during the next federal election and that their job was “to decide how best to divide up this time.” They were asked to assign a percentage of time to each leader. Participants could assign a value from 0% to 100% for each leader—provided that the total allocations summed to 100%.

Figure 31 reports the mean percentage of debate time that participants allocated to each leader. The results suggest that, when this task is made more concrete, we do see some evidence of departures from perfect equality. The mean allocation for the two largest parties—the Liberals and the Conservatives—was in the order of 21% of the available time, while the mean allocation for the three smallest parties—the BQ, the Greens and the PPC—was in the order of 13% of the available time. The NDP fell between these two sets with a mean allocation of 17% of the available time.

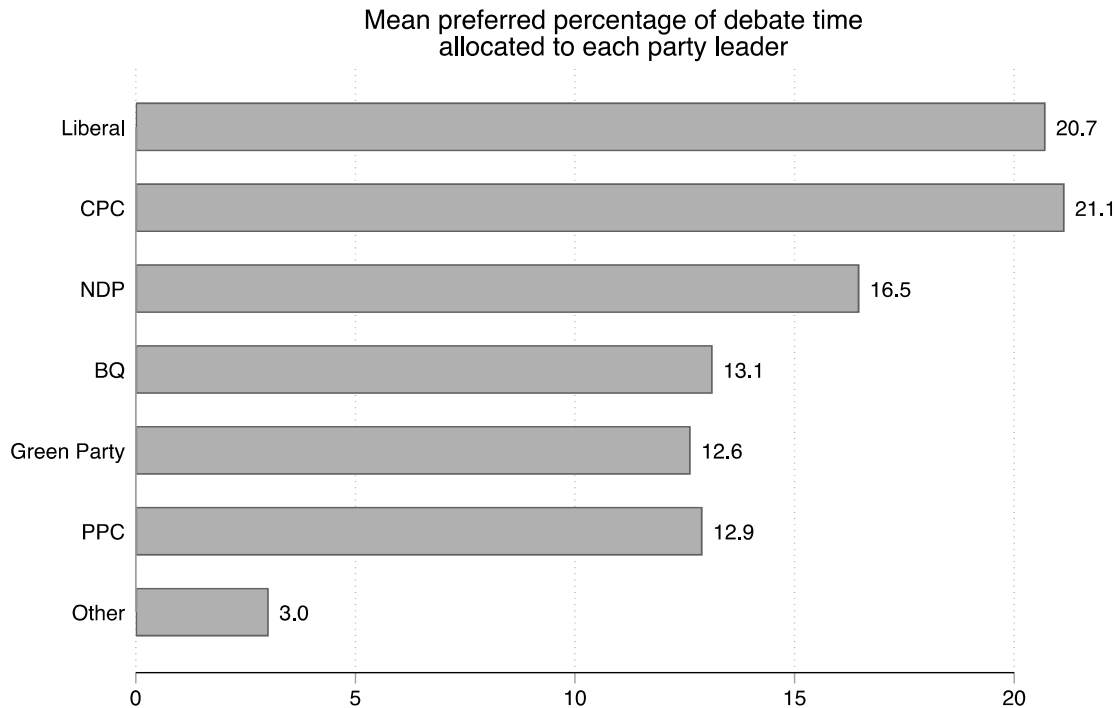


Figure 31: Preferred time allocation between party leaders. *Note: survey responses are weighted.*

While there are noticeable differences in allocation between some of these parties, it is worth recognizing that the substantive departure from equality remains relatively modest. Consider that perfect equality between six parties (setting aside the unspecified “Other” in the question) would imply a $100/6 = 17\%$ allocation for each party. Thus, the mean allocation for the two largest parties is only 4 percentage points higher than perfect equality and the mean allocation for the three smallest parties is only 4 percentage points lower than perfect equality.

Moderation and the sources of questions

A key design consideration of many modern leaders’ debates is the nature of the moderation and, more broadly, of the sources of the questions put to the party leaders. We approach this again from multiple perspectives: by asking participants to choose between hypothetical pairs of debates that differ with respect to the moderation; by asking participants what they believe a moderator’s role should be; and by asking participants to allocate a share of questions according to their preferred sources (e.g., the moderator, the public, journalists, etc.).

Figure 32 presents five sets of binary choices. We highlight three findings. First, Canadians strongly prefer a debate in which the moderator provides an accountability role to one in which the moderator takes on a more limited role. Nearly nine in ten (88%) preferred a debate in which the moderator asked the leaders “tough questions - even though this means you may disapprove of some of the moderator’s

questions” to a debate where the moderator asked “easy questions - even though this means you may find some of the moderator’s questions dull.” It is worth underscoring that this preference for “tough questions” came with the understanding that they, as viewers, might disapprove of some of the questions. A similarly large majority (86%) favoured a debate in which the moderator served as a fact checker—even though this role came at the price of less speaking time for the leaders.

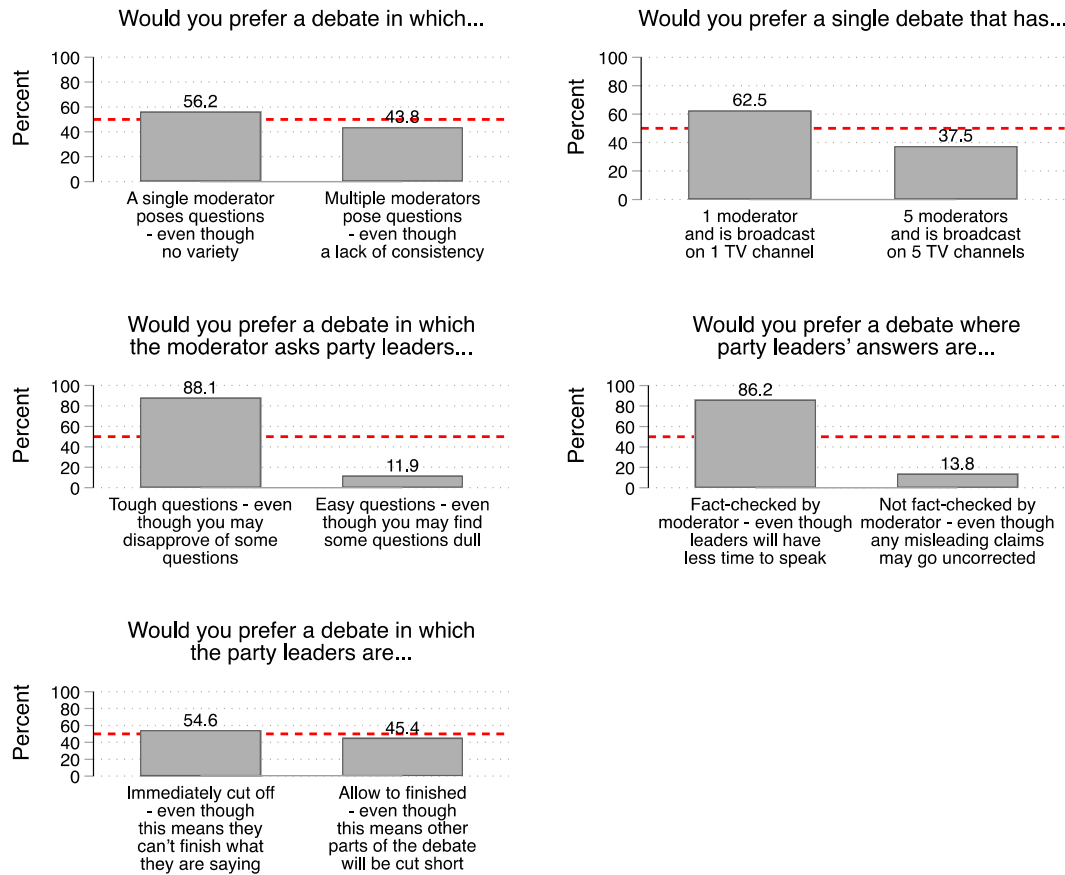


Figure 32: Binary preferences regarding moderation. *Note: survey responses are weighted.*

Second, more modest majorities favored a debate with a single moderator to a debate with multiple moderators—regardless of whether this choice was framed as a trade-off in terms of variety or a tradeoff in terms of channel access. For example, 63% favoured a debate with a single moderator that was broadcast on a single channel to a debate with five moderators that was broadcast on five channels.

Third, Canadians were relatively evenly split about how to manage leaders who might exceed their allotted time. Just over half (55%) preferred a debate in which the party leaders are “immediately cut off when they reach their time limit - even though this means they can’t finish what they are saying” to one in which the leaders are “allowed to finish what they are saying - even though this means that other

parts of the debate will be cut short to make up for lost time.” This split, we believe, reflects the views of many focus group participants who thought that cutting leaders off was impolite—while still recognizing that some kind of cut off was a ‘necessary evil.’ Future debate organizers may wish to reflect on how they can simultaneously pursue a debate in which time is closely regulated (per the public’s preference for equal time between leaders) while still minimizing the need for—or the obtrusiveness of—cutting off leaders who run long.

Next, we turn to what Canadians think are the appropriate roles for a debate moderator. In this question, participants were presented with a list of six possible roles and asked which they thought should be part of a moderator’s job. The results, presented in Figure 33, are striking. In each instance, no fewer than four in five felt that each role was indeed part of the moderator’s job. The public’s aggregate preference is thus far from ‘laissez-faire’ moderation. Very large majorities want the moderator to ask tough questions of the leaders; to ensure that the leaders answer these questions; to enforce equal time among leaders; to make sure the leaders do not talk over each other; to ensure the leaders are respectful of each other; and to fact-check leaders’ answers. In short, most Canadians want the moderator to be a key actor in the debate through promoting accountability and ensuring fair play.

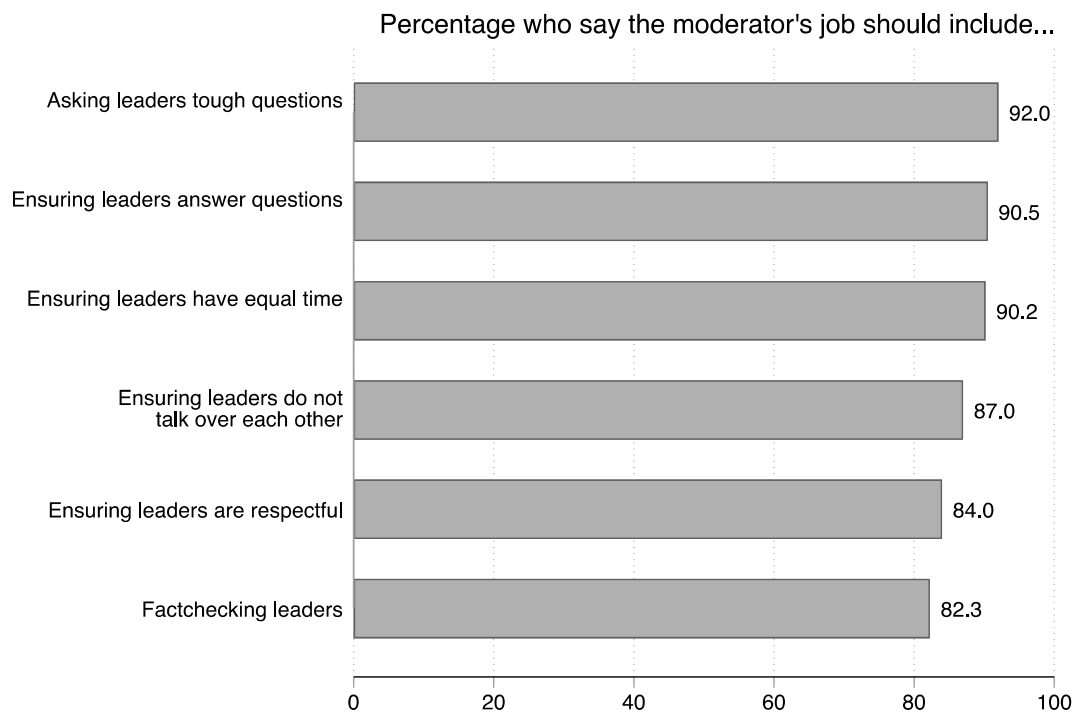


Figure 33: Preferences regarding moderator roles. *Note: survey responses are weighted.*

The moderator is not the only possible source of questions put to the leaders in a debate. Indeed, the 2021 debates included questions from other sources: journalists were invited to ask questions live, as were a handful of members of the public. How do Canadians feel about these sources? To answer this,

we again asked participants to undertake a constrained allocation task: that is, to assign a percentage of questions to various possible sources. Participants could allocate anywhere from 0 to 100% of questions to a given source—provided that the total allocations summed to 100%.

Figure 34 reports the mean percentage allocated to each source. Canadians, on average, wanted the moderator to ask the most questions: roughly 2 of every 5 questions. Next, participants wanted to see members of the public asking 22% of questions on average—slightly ahead of journalists at 19%. For comparison, we included “university professors” as a possible question source—though this is not a common practice in federal leaders’ debates in Canada. Of the available sources, professors were the least popular—allocated only 15% of questions on average. These results largely echo the preceding findings: Canadians see a vital role for the moderator in a debate, but also seek to reserve some space for the public and for other journalists to put their questions.

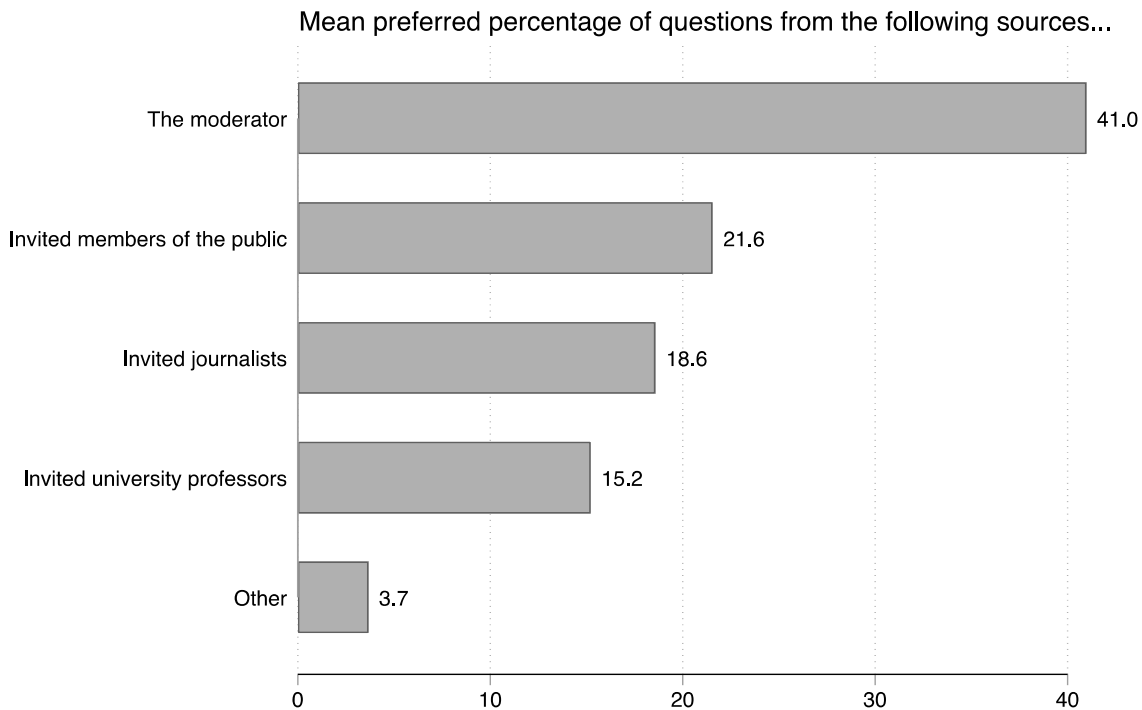


Figure 34: Preferences regarding question sources. *Note: survey responses are weighted.*

Debate topics

The choice of topics is another crucial ingredient in any debate—not least because, as noted in Section 4.5.1, many viewers of the 2021 debates found that these events did not cover the issues that were most important to them. Indeed, satisfying the diverse interests of the Canadian public in a two-hour period is a significant challenge. The choice of topics requires balancing at least two important considerations: the number of topics and the depth of discussion of each. While including more topics in a given debate help it cover the issues of interest to more Canadians, this may come at the price of depth—reducing the time available to cover the party platforms in the detail that Canadians want.

We put this tradeoff to survey participants—asking which they would prefer: a debate that covers “3 topics and spends 40 minutes on each topic” or a debate that covers “6 topics and spends 20 minutes on each topic.” The results are reported in Figure 35. Nearly three-quarters preferred the six-topic debate. (In Section 4.7.8, we explore the appeal of single-topic debates in the context of possible campaigns with more than one debate in each official language.)

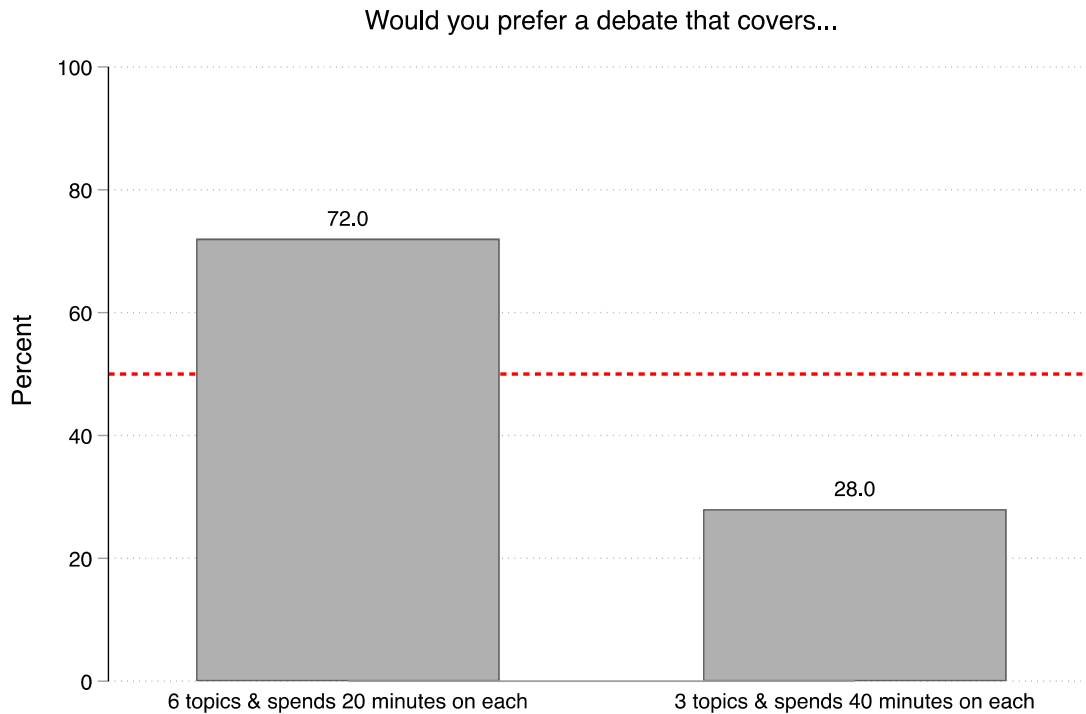


Figure 35: Binary preference regarding number of debate topics. *Note: survey responses are weighted.*

We also probed the preferences for debate topics further with another time allocation task—again asking participants to divide up the available time of a single debate between a set of five pre-selected topics. Figure 36 reports the mean percentage of debate time allocated by participants to each topic. The results confirm the appeal of a debate with several topics, while also suggesting an openness to allocating more time to some topics than others.

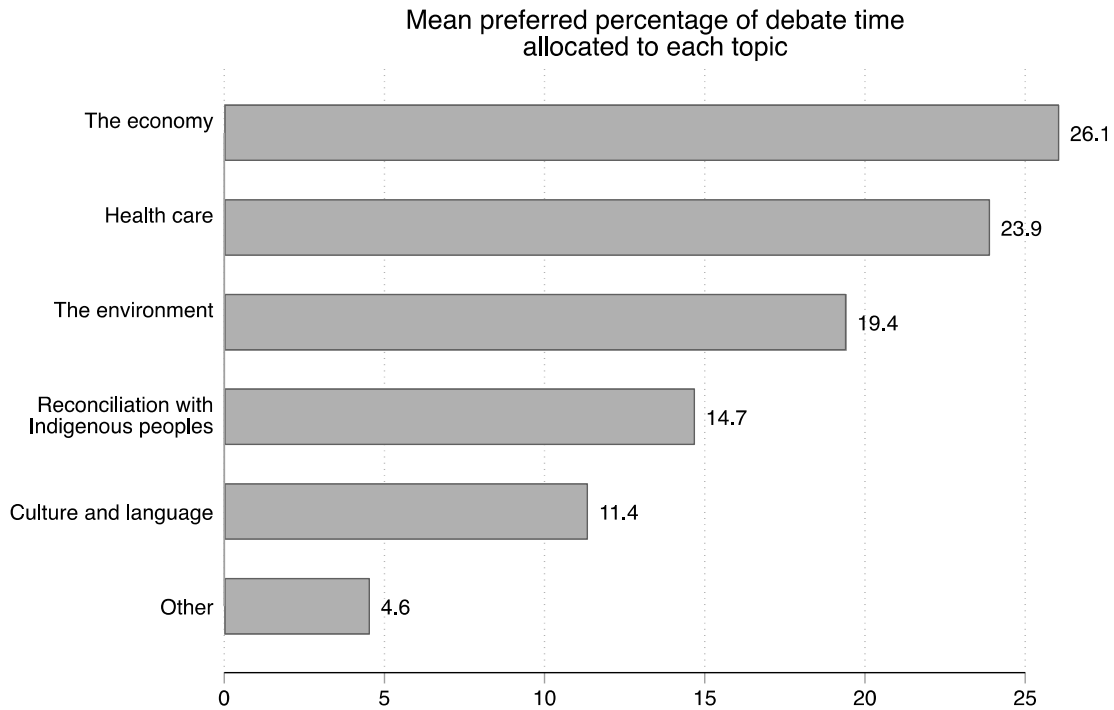


Figure 36: Time allocation between debate topics. *Note: survey responses are weighted.*

Debate formats

Format has an important bearing on the conduct of any debate and potentially influences how debates can achieve Canadians' top ranked goals of learning about the parties, holding leaders accountable, and building trust in the democratic process. We begin our exploration with four binary questions pertaining to debate format. For each question, participants were again asked to choose which of the two hypothetical debates they preferred. The results are reported in Figure 37.

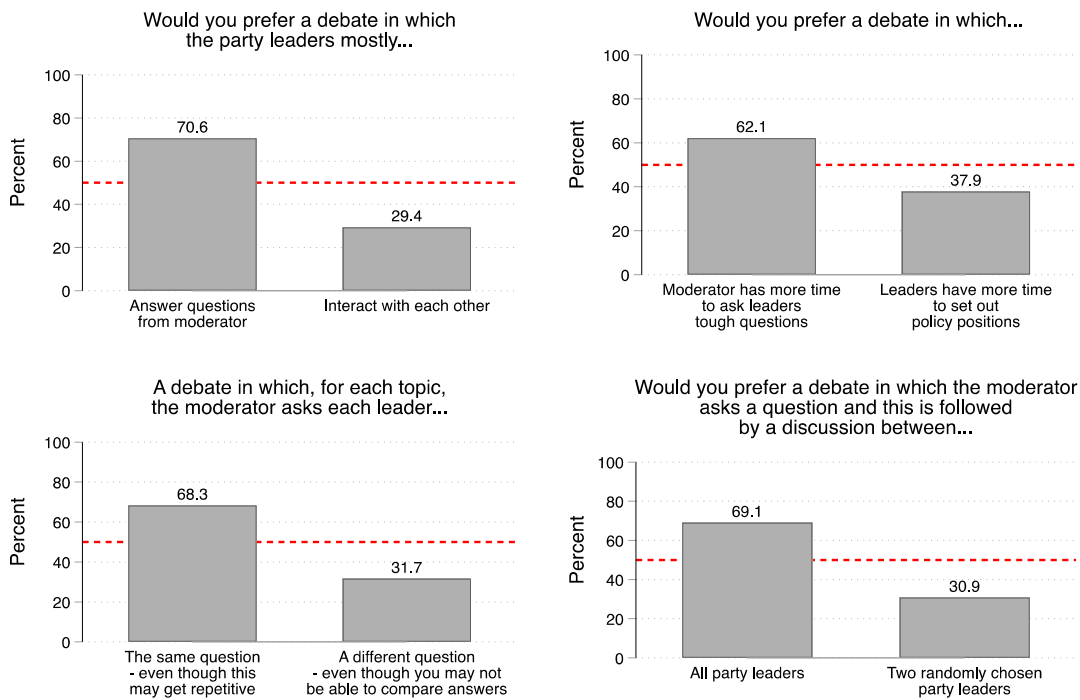


Figure 37: Binary preferences regarding debate format. *Note: survey responses are weighted.*

We make four findings. First, over seven in ten (71%) favoured a debate in which the leaders mostly answered questions from the moderator over a debate where the leaders mostly interacted with each other. Second, a majority (62%) again favoured the moderator-centered questioning model over a model in which leaders have more time “to set out their policy positions in detail.” Third, with respect to the moderators’ questions, just over two-thirds (68%) favoured asking each leader the same question “even though this may get repetitive” over a debate in which the moderator asks each leader a different question. Fourth, following on this same theme, we find that 69% of Canadians favoured a debate in which the moderator poses a question and the ensuing discussion includes all party leaders—compared to a debate in which the ensuing discussion involves only two leaders chosen at random. While the random selection of leaders is a common strategy for managing some parts of a debate, Canadians again appear to prefer greater inclusion—a preference that reflects their commitment to the equal participation of leaders noted earlier. The challenge remains how to build an inclusive debate featuring several party leaders, while still avoiding situations where the leaders talk over each other.

To explore these format preferences from a different perspective, we again asked participants to engage in a time allocation task for a single, two-hour debate in the next federal election. Participants were asked to allot time across three possible formats: (1) “The party leaders answer questions asked by the moderator”; (2) “The party leaders interact with each other without the involvement of the moderator”; (3) “The party leaders set out their policy positions in detail and without interruption.” Participants’

responses were constrained such that the total of the allotted percentages summed to 100. The results are reported in Figure 38.

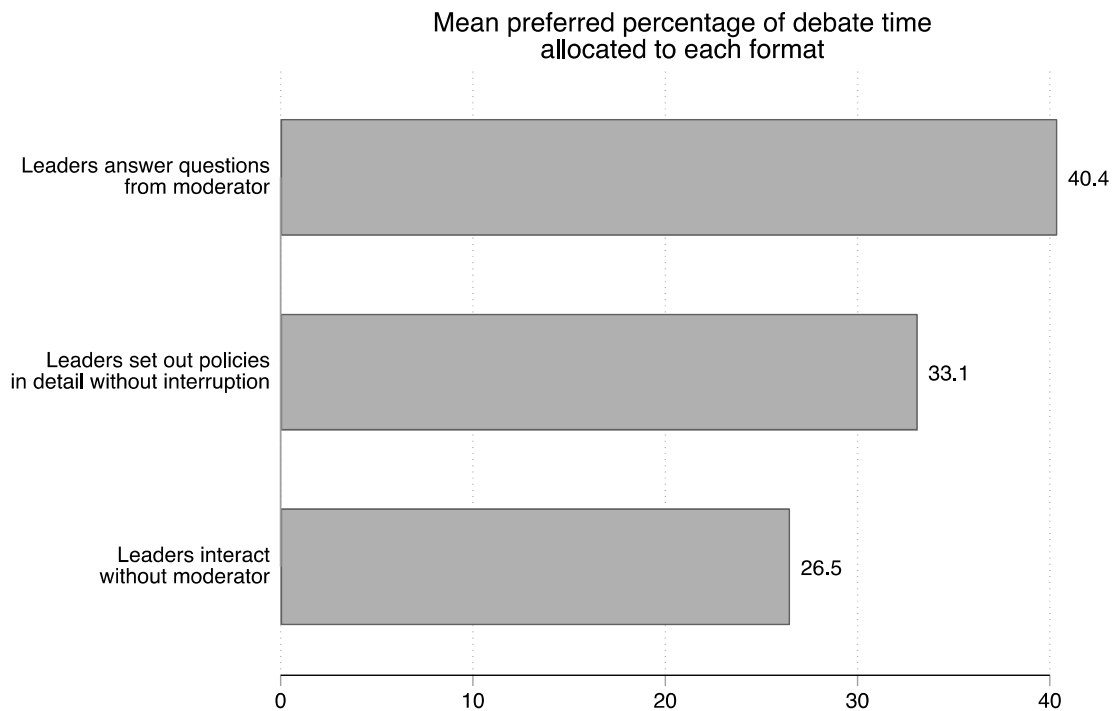


Figure 38: Time allocation between debate formats. *Note: survey responses are weighted.*

Echoing previous results, a moderator-centric format received the greatest time allocation. Participants on average assigned 40% of the debate time to having leaders answer questions from the moderator. Having said this, participants on average still reserved a third of the time for the leaders to set out their policies without interruption. This format also reflects comments from some focus group participants who wanted debates as a means of efficiently getting up to speed on what the parties were promising during the campaign. Lastly, just over a quarter of the time (27%) was allocated on average to leaders interacting without the moderator. While we find that this kind of interaction was not a leading goal for the debates as such, Canadians may understandably see between-leader interaction as facilitating the kind of learning and accountability they are looking for.

Scheduling the debates

Given that being “too busy” was a common reason for not watching a 2021 debate, we asked participants in the third survey their preference for when to watch a debate live. This was elicited in two steps: first, participants were asked whether they would be more likely to watch on a weekday or a weekend; second, participants were asked their preferred time of day (choosing from 3, 6, 7, 8, or 9 pm). Participants were informed that all times were local to their area. We combined the answers to the two questions and report the results in Figure 39.

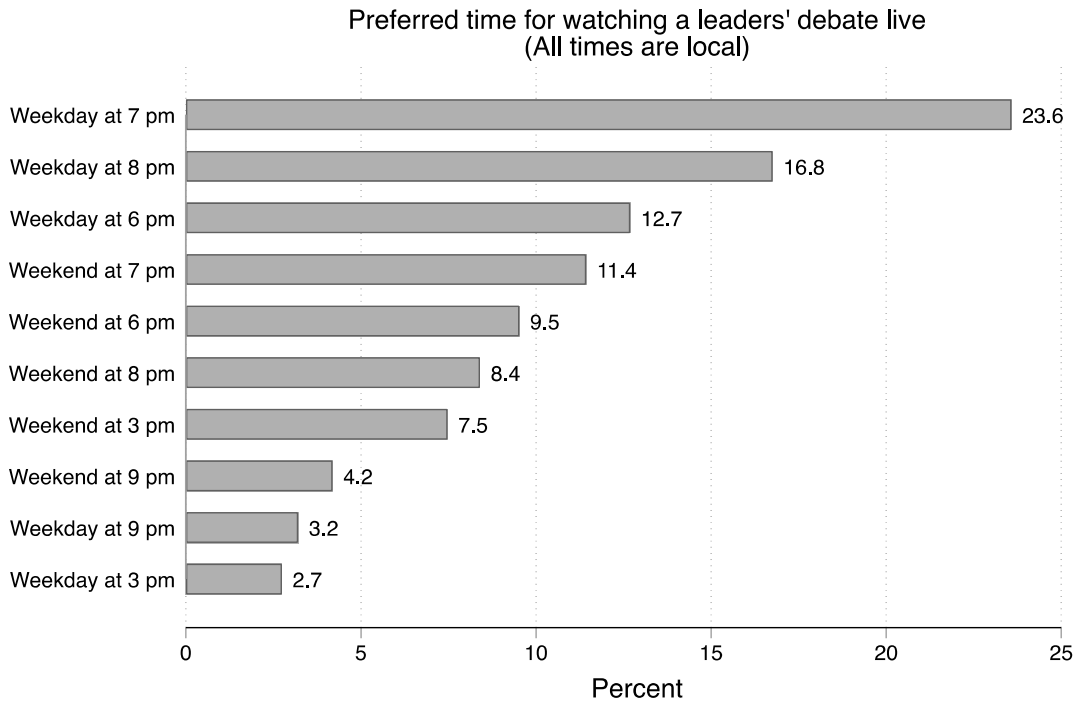


Figure 39: Preferences regarding debate scheduling. *Note: survey responses are weighted.*

The most popular time to watch a debate live—chosen by 24% of participants—is on a weekday at 7 pm. The next two most popular times were on either side of this time slot: namely, 8 pm and 6 pm weekdays. Notably, the least popular times were those early in the day (3 pm) and late in the day (9 pm)—and this was the case whether the debate fell on a weekday or a weekend.

To be sure, accommodating these scheduling preferences cannot be readily done in the context of a single live debate given Canada’s time zones. For example, a weekday debate that starts at 7 pm in the Atlantic time zone (the most preferred time) means a 3 pm start in the Pacific time zone (the least preferred time). Solutions may require further creative thinking that could involve the implementation of regionally-based leaders’ debates, the re-broadcast of previously recorded debates in their entirety, or the increased promotion of on-demand clips of the debates through news sites and social media.

Stage arrangements

We asked Canadians how they would like the party leaders to be arranged on the debate stage. We provided four possible choices: each leader at their own podium; each leader seated around a single table; each leader allowed to walk around the stage; or each leader participating by remote video feed. Figure 40 presents the results. The clear preference, favoured by nearly two thirds (64%) of participants, was to have each party leader stand at their own podium. The least favoured arrangement was remote video feed.

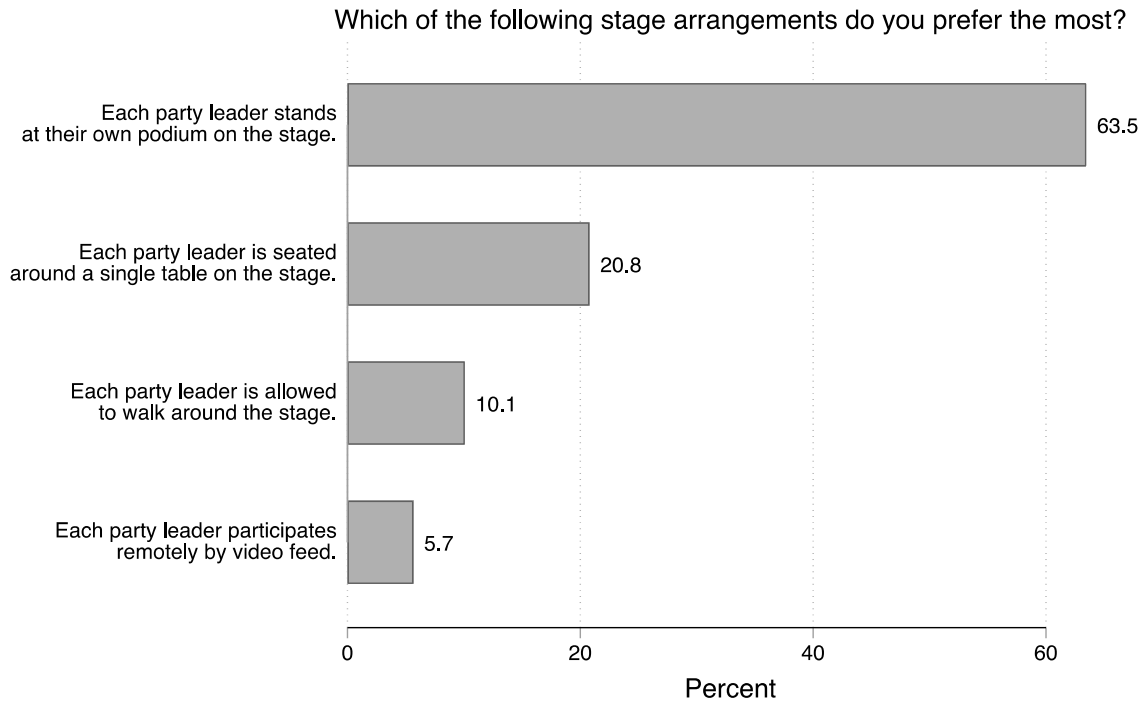


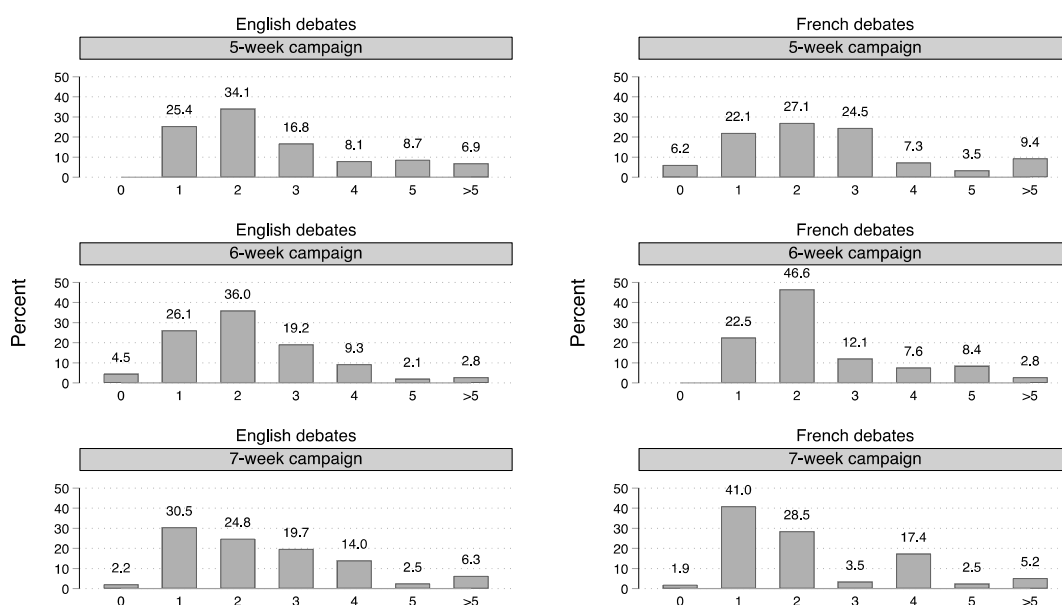
Figure 40: Preferences regarding stage arrangements. *Note: survey responses are weighted.*

Number of debates

The final set of findings take up the key question of how many leaders' debates to hold. As noted earlier, a single debate makes the trade-offs with respect to leader participation, topic, format, and even scheduling particularly challenging. In theory, holding more than one debate—as is done in some other jurisdictions—could go some way to relieving these tensions. Do Canadians, however, want more leaders' debates?

We tackled this question using a variety of approaches. Figure 41 reports Canadians' preferences for the number of debates in each language. Participants could choose 0, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, or more than 5 debates. All participants were asked to choose their preferred number of English-language debates and French-language debates separately; given the intended audience of each debate, we report below the preferences for the number of English debates among English-speaking participants only and the preferences for the number of French debates among French-speaking participants only. Additionally, we randomly assigned all participants to one of three prompts about the length of the campaign. One-third was asked to make their selections when imagining that the next federal election would be five weeks long, another third was asked to imagine that it would be six weeks long, and a final third was told to imagine that it would be seven weeks long. In this way, we can examine whether citizens' preferences for the number of debates varies noticeably as a function of possible campaign lengths.

Preferred number of debates by debate language and campaign length



Preferences for English debates are reported for English-speaking participants. Preferences for French debates are reported for French-speaking participants.

Figure 41: Preferences regarding the number of leaders’ debates, by hypothetical campaign length.

Note: survey responses are weighted.

We make three main findings. First, only a very small proportion of participants wanted no debates at all. Given natural variation in political interest, as well as the negative news commentary that can sometimes accompany leaders’ debates, this result is worth underscoring: the vast majority of Canadians want federal election campaigns to include leaders’ debates. Second, a majority of Canadians would like to see *two or more debates*. In each of the six conditions, only a minority favoured one debate. Third, we do not find statistically significant evidence that campaign length influenced preferences for the number of debates. Put another way, the public demand for debates appears to be no weaker in a 5-week campaign than it is in a 7-week campaign.

Next, we turn to exploring if these preferences for the number of debates are potentially subject to plausible trade-offs. Here we do so in the context of two binary choices, the results of which are reported in Figure 42. First, we asked participants to choose between two arrangements where: (1) there was one debate in each language and all major party leaders participated; or (2) there were two debates in each language but the second debate in each language included only the leaders of the two

largest parties. Faced with this choice, a majority (59%) preferred the one-debate option to the two-debate option—again reflecting, we believe, the public’s strong commitment to the wide and equal participation of party leaders noted earlier in the report.

Second, we asked participants to adjudicate the choice of one or two debates in the context of a potential tradeoff between viewership and issue coverage. Here participants were asked to choose between arrangements where: (1) there was only one debate in each language “even though this means less time to cover the issues;” and (2) there was more than one debate in each language “even though this means fewer people may end up watching a debate during the campaign.” Faced with these two alternatives, a narrow majority (53%) favoured the multi-debate option. In short, we find that the public’s preference for more than one debate is not unconditional—but rather subject to additional considerations, such as what form these additional debates might take.

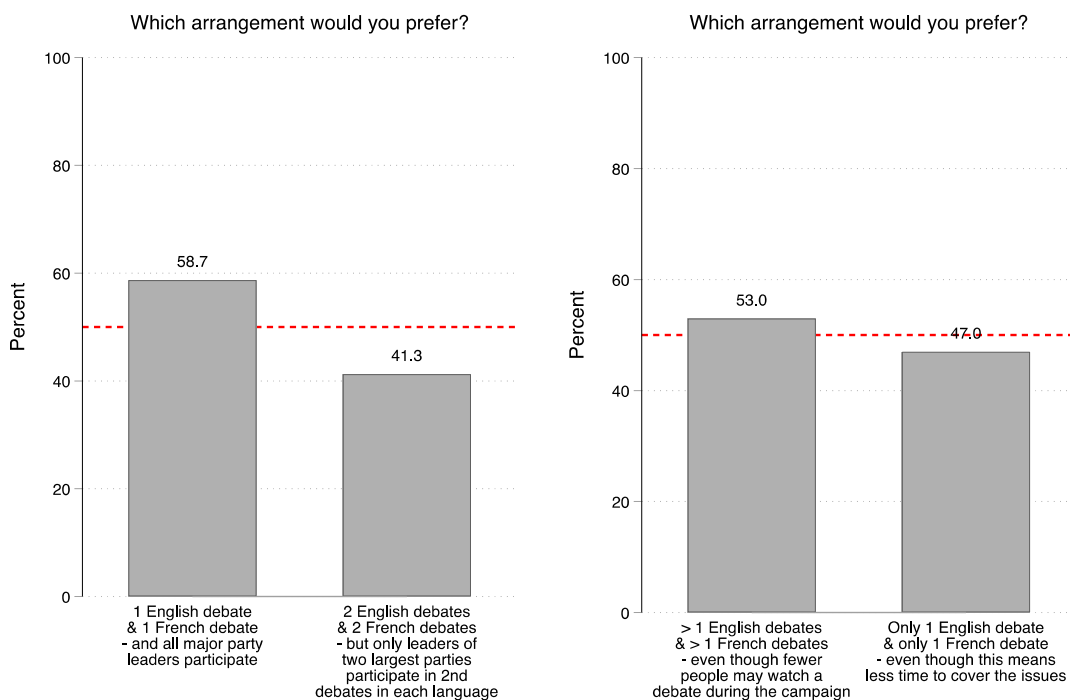


Figure 42: Binary preferences regarding number of debates. *Note: survey responses are weighted.*

Lastly, we tackled in greater depth the various *types* of debates Canadians might want in the federal election campaigns. To be sure, the norm in recent years has been a debate featuring several leaders, covering multiple issues, and including a mix of question sources—but this is not the only way to conduct leaders’ debates. In theory, even in a five-week campaign, there is opportunity for a wide range of public events.

To tap the public's preferences for this wider range of event types, including events that are outside the norm of Canadian federal elections, we asked participants to imagine that they were responsible for deciding how many public events should be held in the next election campaign. They were offered the following types:

Debates between the leaders of all major parties - covering a range of issues

Debates between the leaders of all major parties - covering the environment only

Debates between the leaders of all major parties - covering the economy only

Debates between the leaders of all major parties - covering issues of particular interest to your region

Debates between the leaders of the two largest parties only - covering a range of issues

Public meetings where the leaders of all major parties discuss how to work together

Public meetings between each major party leader and ordinary citizens

Sit-down interviews between each major party leader and journalists

In addition, participants were provided with a write-in "Other" option.

Participants were told that their total selections must be between 1 and 5—meaning they could select five of just one type or distribute their selections across multiple types. The purpose of setting a maximum of five is meant to create a plausible limit on the number of major public events that could reasonably be held during a campaign and, in so doing, incentivize participants to make deliberate allocations in the face of this constraint.

Two versions of this allocation task were created: one for "English-language public events" that was administered only to English-speaking participants and one for "French-language public events" that was administered only to French-speaking participants. The results for English events and French events are reported in Figures 43 and 44, respectively. For simplicity, these results are reported in terms of the percentage who selected at least one of that event type.

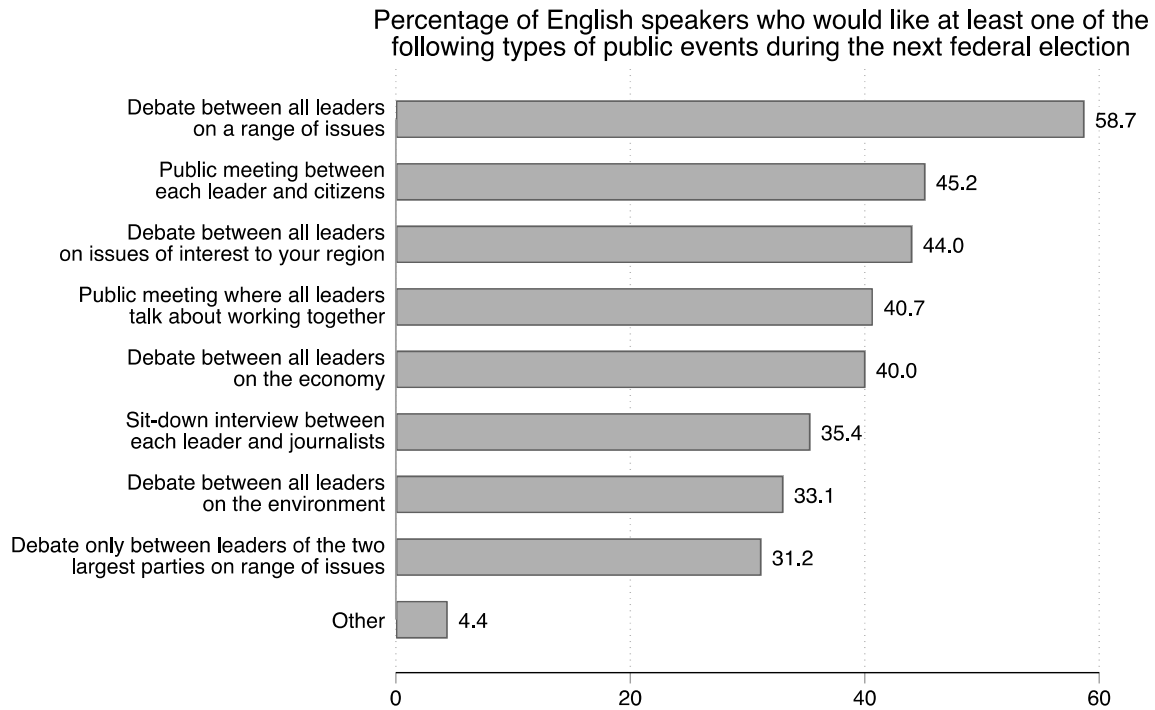


Figure 43: Preferences regarding the number of different types of English-language public events, English participants only. *Note: survey responses are weighted.*

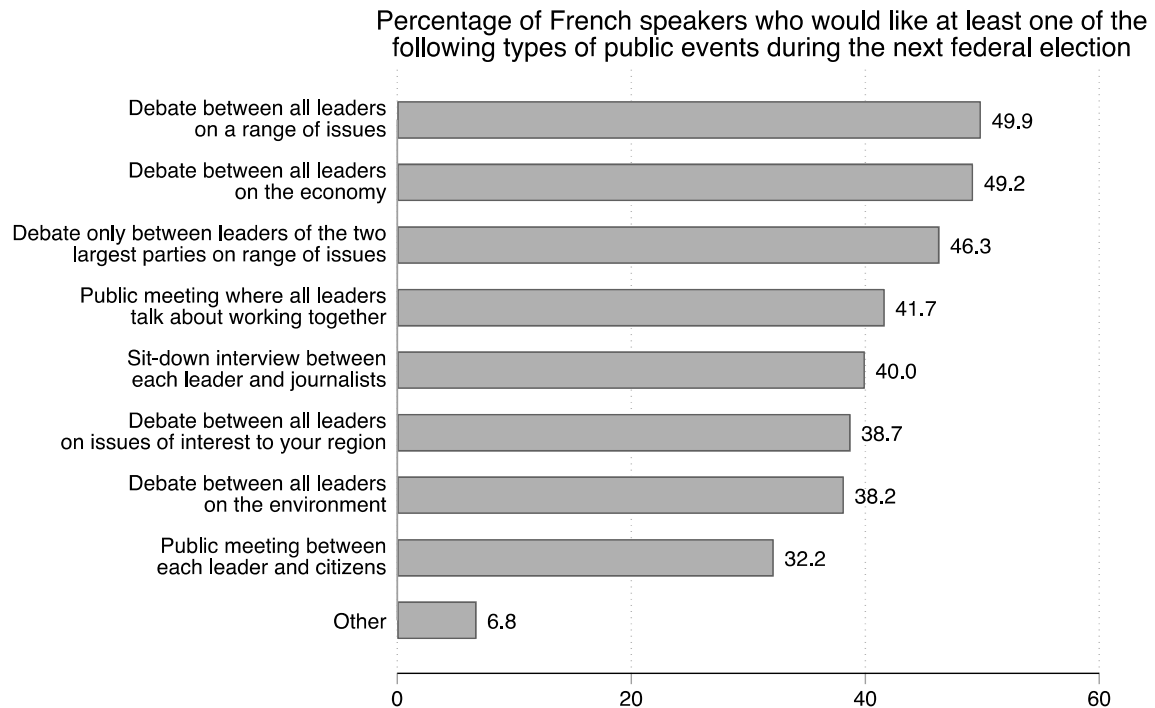


Figure 44: Preferences regarding the number of different types of French-language public events, French participants only. *Note: survey responses are weighted.*

We note two key points from these results. First, the most popular selection in this choice context is also the current practice: namely, a debate between the leaders of all major parties on a range of issues. Consistent with earlier findings, a debate between the two largest parties is less popular—though 32% of English-speaking participants and 46% of French-speaking participants still indicated they wanted at least one of this type of event.

Second, there is a public appetite for a wide variety of events—including types that are not often seen in Canadian federal election campaigns. On the English events side, for example, 45% wanted at least one public meeting “between each major party leader and ordinary citizens” and 44% wanted at least one debate that covered issues of particular interest to their region. Intriguingly, 41% of English-speakers wanted at least one public meeting “where the leaders of all major parties discuss how to work together”—a type of event that runs counter to the typical cut-and-thrust of competitive election campaigns. On the French event side, the top four most popular events included this same collaborative public meeting (42%), but also an all major party debate focused on the economy only (49%) and the top-two leader debate noted above (46%).

Comparing the 2019 and 2021 findings

We conducted a similar study of Canadians’ responses to the two 2019 Commission-organized debates. This included a three-wave survey of Canadians and a similar examination of the Twitter conversation pertaining to the debates. This similar approach—and, in several instances, identical question wordings—used in the two studies allows for some general comparisons between the 2019 and 2021 debates.

Pre-debate awareness

Both the 2019 and 2021 debates registered similarly modest levels of pre-debate awareness. While the exact question wording differed across the two campaigns, the results are broadly comparable: in 2019, we found that only 38% of participants were aware of upcoming debates; by contrast, in 2021, 40% of French-speakers had read, seen or heard something about the upcoming French debate and 26% of English-speaking participants indicated that they had indeed “read, seen, or heard” something about the English debate. Both the 2019 and 2021 debates also experienced limited anticipatory attention on Twitter.

In terms of the demographic correlates of pre-debate awareness, both the 2019 and 2021 results found that rural Canadians were less likely to be aware of the debates and older Canadians were more likely to be aware of them.

Debate viewership

The 2019 and 2021 debates all attracted significant viewership. We find, however, that viewership dropped in 2021. To facilitate comparability, we disaggregated our 2019 results by participant language. We found that 43% of French-speakers reported watching the 2019 French debate and 39% of English-speakers reported watching the 2019 English debate. As reported above in Section 4.2.1, the analogous figures for 2021 are: 32% of French-speakers reported watching the French debate and 29% of English speakers reported watching the English debate.

While we lack the necessary information to explain this roughly 10 percentage point drop in viewership, we speculate that it is likely attributable to several factors—including the COVID-19 pandemic and the scheduling of the debates. The timing of the 2021 election, for example, meant that the debates were held approximately one month earlier than in 2019 and during a week in which many Canadian families were returning to work and school following the summer break. With respect to the demographic correlates of viewership, both the 2019 and 2021 results show that official language minorities were more likely to tune in.

Viewership medium

Television was, by far, the most common way in which Canadians watched the debates in 2019 and 2021. However, we register a drop in the share of television-based viewership—and an accompanying increase in the share of online-based viewership—in 2021. For example, in 2019, 93% of French-debate viewership was through television; in 2021, this fell to 79%.

Engagement with the debates

Among French-debate viewers, the proportion who discussed the debate with others held steady between 2019 and 2021. The proportion who commented online about the debate increased from 8% in 2019 to 23% in 2021. Among English-debate viewers, the proportion who discussed the debate with others dropped from 59% in 2019 to 39% in 2021, while the proportion commenting on social media remained essentially unchanged.

Evaluations of the French debate

While majorities in both 2019 and 2021 agreed that the debate was “informative,” the proportion in agreement fell from 72% to 59%. The moderation received similarly favourable evaluations in both 2019 and 2021. For example, in 2019, 77% felt that the moderator asked good questions; 80% felt the same way in 2021. Judgments of leaders’ answers remained stable as well: in 2019, 41% agreed their answers were “clear;” 43% felt the same way in 2021.

Evaluations of the English debate

Majorities of viewers in 2019 and 2021 characterized the debate as “informative:” 57% in 2019 and 63% in 2021. The share of viewers characterizing the debate as “dull” also held steady: 52% in 2019 and 53% in 2021. The moderation in both the 2019 and 2021 debates was favourably evaluated. For example, in 2019, 77% of viewers felt that the moderators asked good questions and 79% felt they treated each leader fairly; the comparable figures for 2021 were 77% and 76% respectively. On the question of the number of leaders participating, 63% of 2019 viewers agreed that there were too many; in 2021, this proportion fell to 47%. (In 2021, five leaders participated—one fewer than in 2019).

The impact of the debates

We identified several positive impacts of viewership for both the 2019 and 2021 debates. With respect to political engagement-related outcomes, both the 2019 and 2021 debates generated positive impacts for news consumption about—and discussion of—the federal election. Neither had an impact on habitual news consumption more generally. Notably, the 2021 debates had a positive impact on interest in both the federal election and in politics generally; we did not find evidence of this in 2019.

For political knowledge, we found that neither the 2019 nor 2021 debates affected viewers’ knowledge of salient facts about economic and social conditions or their confidence in their voting decisions. In 2019, we found that viewership was associated with greater knowledge of party platforms—a relationship we did not find in the 2021 data. In 2021, we found that viewership was associated with an improvement in the ability to rate all five leaders on the feeling thermometer scale—an outcome that was not analyzed in our 2019 report.

Regarding political evaluations, we found evidence that the debates were associated with greater updating of party ratings in 2019 but not so in 2021. By contrast, we found that the debates were associated with greater updating of leader ratings in 2021 but not so in 2019. On institutional evaluations, we found that neither the 2019 nor the 2021 debates contributed to greater political

efficacy or democratic satisfaction. In 2021, however, we found that the debates contributed to increased trust in the federal government. (The institutional trust questions were new, however, to the 2021 study and thus cannot be readily compared against the 2019 results.)

Lastly, with respect to political behaviours, we found that neither the 2019 nor the 2021 debates impacted the intention to turn out to vote or the party that participants intended to vote for. The 2019 study did, however, find that debate viewership was positively associated with expectations of more non-voting forms of political participation in the future—a pattern that did not recur in 2021.

In short, there is considerable similarity in terms of what the 2019 and 2021 debates did and did not impact. Both, for example, generated greater engagement in the federal election. The two sets of debates also differed in some of their impacts but, with only two election cycles of data available, we are not able to give an account of why such differences emerged.

Public preferences about future debates

Our 2021 study provides a substantially more detailed picture of Canadians' preferences about future debates than our 2019 study. The 2019 evidence on this point is derived primarily from a conjoint experiment. The 2021 study deliberately employed a different—and, we believe, complementary—design. Thus, while the differing survey instruments do not allow for a strict apples-to-apples comparison, we nevertheless can point to some recurring patterns. In the context of a single debate, participants in both the 2019 and 2021 studies tended to favour a multi-topic format over most single-topic formats. Both sets of participants also tended to seek a place for 'ordinary citizens' to ask questions of leaders. Both sets favoured a single moderator over multiple moderators and both tended to favour a moderator that was empowered to cut off the leaders as warranted.

Appendix—Supplementary Report on Focus Groups

Introduction

In order to extend our understanding of debates in Canada, we also probed citizens' reactions to the 2021 leaders' debates qualitatively. We chose to conduct focus groups because they allow researchers to present a "treatment" (i.e., the debate held in their official language) to citizens and see their reactions to it. We believe this adds important nuance and completes the quantitative analysis of our report.

After describing our methodology, we present the findings from the focus groups divided into five topics: the objectives of a debate, general feelings towards the 2021 leaders' debates, perception of the leaders, the format of the 2021 leaders' debates, and perspectives on future debates.

Methodology

2.1 Sampling and screening

A total of four focus groups were conducted, of which two were related to the English language leaders' debate and two to the French language leaders' debate. In each case, the focus group was directed in the language of the debate: that is, the two English focus groups discussed the 2021 English language leaders' debate and the two French focus groups discussed the 2021 French language leaders' debate. The English language focus group was moderated by Peter John Loewen, professor of political science at the University of Toronto. The French language focus group was moderated by Allison Harell, a professor of political science at the Université du Québec à Montréal.

The first English language focus group was held on December 15th, 2021, and the second on December 16th. The French language focus groups took place on December 17th as well as 20th, 2021. The focus groups lasted 90 minutes. A total of 18 adults were interviewed (9 in each language). Participants were recruited through a commercial firm so as to be broadly representative of the population in terms of age, region, and gender and racial identity. Some—but not all—participants reported watching a 2021 debate prior to attending the focus groups, which provided valuable variation during the ensuing discussions.

2.2 Procedure

Each focus group was held on Zoom, and all followed the same procedure. After entering the meeting, participants were welcomed by the moderator and asked to present themselves (first name only). The session was divided into three sections. First, in the introduction, the moderator explained that the focus group aimed to better understand the views of Canadians about debates. After defining what a debate is, participants were asked: what should the goals of a debate be? Following this discussion, the session turned towards the 2021 debate and asked the group their initial reactions or impressions to the 2021 debate that was held in their language.

Second, we presented four video clips of the 2021 debate (i.e., the 2021 debate held in each group's official language) and asked participants to react to what they watched. We collected a total of eight segments, four from the English language debate and four from the French language debate. The clips ranged between four and eleven minutes in length.⁵¹ For example, one video clip presented a question from a citizen on climate change followed by a head-to-head exchange between Mr. Trudeau and Mr. O'Toole on the same topic. After watching each clip, the moderator asked to group their thoughts on the clip, as well as semi-directed questions regarding the format and structure of the debate. This section aims to show particular moments from the debate where some features of the debate format are salient. All debate sections were covered by the four clips (open-debate, head-to-head, citizen question, journalist intervention, etc.). Therefore, the clips were selected to represent the different portions of the debate, as well as the differences in interactions between candidates.

The last section was on what leaders' debates could be. In other words, we asked participants to think of what the ideal debate looked like for them. To help them to structure their opinions, we presented a few pairs of alternatives (also asked in the third wave of the survey) on debate structure. For example, we asked participants if they preferred debates with more parties or fewer parties.

⁵¹ The video clips were presented in the language of the focus group. The French groups did not watch any content in English (or vice-versa).

The focus groups were recorded, and an anonymized transcript of the discussions was created following the sessions. The analysis below is based on these written transcripts. The reported results are built on recurring observations from participants' responses, such as areas of consensus and differences of opinions.

Findings

3.1 The goals of a debate

We identified three main goals that synthesize participants' views. First and foremost, the majority of participants said that they want to learn about the party platforms and policy propositions. For instance, a participant said that "the objective, I think, is to express and clearly show what their projects are, and what they are going to do for us." Therefore, citizens want to know what the parties propose and how it can affect their lives. This observation also speaks to the results from the third wave of the survey, where we find that the top-ranked goal for a leaders' debate is to learn about party platforms (see Figure 29).

Second, participants expressed a desire to learn about each leader's character and personality. We observe that they want to hear and see how a leader answers questions, reacts under pressure and interacts with others. For example, someone noted that "it's really important to see how they interact, how they get along because when there are bigger issues on the table." Hence, participants want to understand who the leaders are and how they can fit in a position such as Prime Minister that needs certain traits and skills. Further, we also observe that they want to know the leaders' values. For the participants, values are tied to their policies and their behaviours during a debate. This also relates to the survey, where we find that 11% of the participants ranked "learning about party leaders" as the most important goal of a debate (see Figure 29).

Finally, the participants noted that the questions of a debate must be oriented towards the first two goals. They said that questions should be relatively hard but, most importantly, that they must be specific to ensure that leaders' responses are not vague. This relates to the idea that they want details on the platforms and how the leaders interact without watching a discussion where leaders talk over each other.

3.2 General feelings about the 2021 leaders' debates

Participants who saw the 2021 leaders' debates prior to attending the focus group expressed relatively positive feedback about them. They thought the debates were well structured and that the leaders were respectful and polite (particularly in the French language debate). For instance, a participant notes that he "found that it [the debate] was much more sugar-coated, very calm, very respectful." Further, after viewing the clips and discussing it with the groups, a participant said that watching the debate helped open the electorate's perspectives. They note that hearing the responses from the leaders directly helps them understand who the leaders are and if they want to vote for them or not.

Further, participants felt that the questions were not specific enough. Some participants argued that some questions were too broad, which caused the answers to be vague. However, it is important to note that several participants thought that the interventions and questions from the journalists were especially interesting because they were very clear and specific.

3.3 Perceptions of the leaders

Party leaders were obviously at the center of the video clips. Hence, participants expressed thoughts on their general behaviours within the structure of the debate. We observe two distinct reactions. On the one hand, a number of citizens expressed political reactions to what the leaders were discussing during the videoclips. We interpret this as a natural response and a sign that participants were engaged in watching the clips. The discussions between the leaders are important because they help citizens understand the party policies and how these fit with their own beliefs.

On the other hand, participants also expressed frustration towards some leader behaviours. They were irritated by two elements. First, they thought that the leaders were not answering questions. Most participants in the focus groups thought leaders were too vague in their answers and that the moderator could have intervened more to make sure leaders answered these questions.

Second, participants disliked when leaders spoke at the same time or when they interrupted each other. Although some participants pointed out that leaders must challenge their opponents, most participants found this situation confusing. Further, they express that when leaders talk over each other, it is hard to get information and they lose interest. For example, a participant said that this situation is "confusing. I don't understand anything anymore when they are all talking. And, yeah, it's frustrating when they are just, [...] kind of fighting with one another. [...] I find it hard to follow, [...] of who is saying what." Another individual adds that they "feel like no one was able to get their point across and [are] left feeling more confused than when [they] came in." It is key for citizens to understand the information they are getting and participants made clear that exchanges when multiple leaders are talking at once prevents them learning this information.

3.4 Format of the 2021 leaders' debates

3.4.1 Number of leaders

When asked about the number of leaders that should be present on stage, participants preferred having fewer than five parties. Indeed, several participants thought that only the three biggest parties should be invited. For them, this proposition is motivated by the idea that they want to see candidates that have "a chance of being Prime Minister." For instance, a participant said regarding the present format: "we miss out on what the people who actually might occupy the Prime Minister's job, what they have to say, and listen to [other] people."

Yet, other participants pointed out that they appreciate the current format. According to them, it is important to hear a diversity of views on several issues—even if the leader is unlikely to become Prime Minister. Hence, the interventions of the smaller parties, by their questions and policies, enhance the learning of watchers. Moreover, some citizens noted that their inclusion is also good for accountability.

3.4.2 Number of debates

Most participants seem to agree that having more debates that focus on specific issues—or at least on fewer issues per debate is preferable. Citizens think that having more debates will help leaders to add more details to their propositions and policies. Hence, they could gain greater information from the questions of the moderator. This echoes the results from the survey, where we find that participants want two or more debates. We learned with the focus group that what might drive this preference is the

desire to have clear and detailed answers to questions and to policy proposition of the parties. Some participants, however, expressed some reluctance about multiple debates because they found a format with only one debate easier to follow. Further, a participant pointed out that—in a campaign with multiple debates—a citizen might choose one debate over another because of its content, which might reduce learning in domains that might not be salient to this individual. In other words, having one debate on a wide variety of issues encourages citizens to think about a wide range of general issues.

3.4.3 Time allocation

We highlight two themes from the focus groups regarding time allocation during the debates. First, people generally thought that leaders did not have enough time to speak about their policies. Participants would have liked to see the leaders explain in detail their propositions. As noted in Section 3.4.2, participants would like to see more time devoted to each issue—even if it means that more debates are organized. For instance, a participant notes that "there's not enough time [...]. When they start [... speaking of] their platform, there's really no detail or follow up on those." Furthermore, they feel that the leaders could be more specific but that the debate structure prevents them from doing so. Indeed, a participant said that "it seems like they're just rushing through everything and no one's really getting the answers."

Second, participants in the focus groups expressed a strong preference towards the equal distribution of time between the leaders. Fairness was at the center of this view. Participants thought that all leaders should have the same amount of time to express their ideas. Yet, some respondents also said that they like discussions between leaders and that it might mean that some leaders have a little less time to speak. Overall, the discussion in the focus group demonstrates that participants tend to prefer equal speaking time between leaders but that the enforcement of this rule should not be too strict.

3.4.4 Moderator

Participants particularly appreciated the role of the moderator during the 2021 leaders' debates. Indeed, very few participants had negative comments regarding moderator interventions and questions. Participants generally thought that the moderators were important to guide discussions and make sure questions were answered.

Importantly, participants were in favour of the various interventions made by the moderators in the debates. They thought that the moderator should cut off leaders—either to make sure that leaders answered a question or to ensure equal speaking time between leaders. That said, some participants found the moderator interventions confusing at times because leaders could not end their sentences, which made their responses less clear to participants.

Overall, participants felt that the moderator should play a central role. It is important that they intervene when necessary to re-direct the discussion towards the question or make sure that the debate was structured and respectful.

3.4.5 Journalists

People in the focus group also liked the interventions of the invited journalists. They thought it was a good addition to the moderator questions. Specifically, they appreciated the fact that the journalist questions were specific to each leader's policy propositions. As one participant noted, these were: "an

interesting opportunity to [...] get a little bit deeper on some of the issues and questions [...]." The general feeling was that journalists' questions enhanced learning of party propositions and ideas. Further, participants liked that the different journalists challenged the leaders on their responses (although some participants thought some were a little too aggressive). Overall, participants found that journalists' questions relevant and important to have a better understanding of the party platform.

3.4.6 Citizens' questions

Citizens' questions are another segment that the participants in the focus groups liked. Participants thought this format was clear and particularly relatable since a citizen like them asked a simple and concise question. They also appreciated the format where each leader directly answers the question—though they would have liked to see more time for each of these leader responses. As one participant notes, "it makes it more relatable to hear somebody, [...] from our level to be able to speak their voice and hopefully represents a lot of people in Canada who also have that same question."

Participants expressed a desire to see more questions from regular citizens. They proposed to add questions from citizens in the debate. They also thought it would be interesting to let the citizen ask a follow-up question based on leaders' responses.

3.5 Future debates

At the end of each focus group, we asked participants about what their ideal debate would look like. Two further themes stood out. First, participants said that they felt lost at the start of the 2021 leaders' debates because the structure was unclear to them and they did not know where the parties, broadly speaking, stood regarding policy. One focus group proposed having some kind of introductory segment where each leader can present what they stand for generally—before answering questions. In other words, participants felt that the start of the debates were abrupt and that an introduction to the parties would have helped them gain a better understanding of the platforms. A discussion between three participants (anonymized as P1, P2, and P3) from a French focus group illustrates this point:

"P1: My idea is for each leader to prepare a video capsule with the points of interest that the party wants to develop and a summary of promises, which are then presented each at a time. [...]"

P2: I wasn't thinking a video but a presentation with bullet points [... of the] subjects that are important to them [...]. So we already have an idea of what is going to happen, which questions are going to be asked and all that; not just presenting a debate out of the blue. Not everybody follows the news, not everybody follows what parties present and what they want to do. I think that for the general public, it would be nice to have a presentation and then have the debate.

Appendix 11 – Accessibility and Distribution

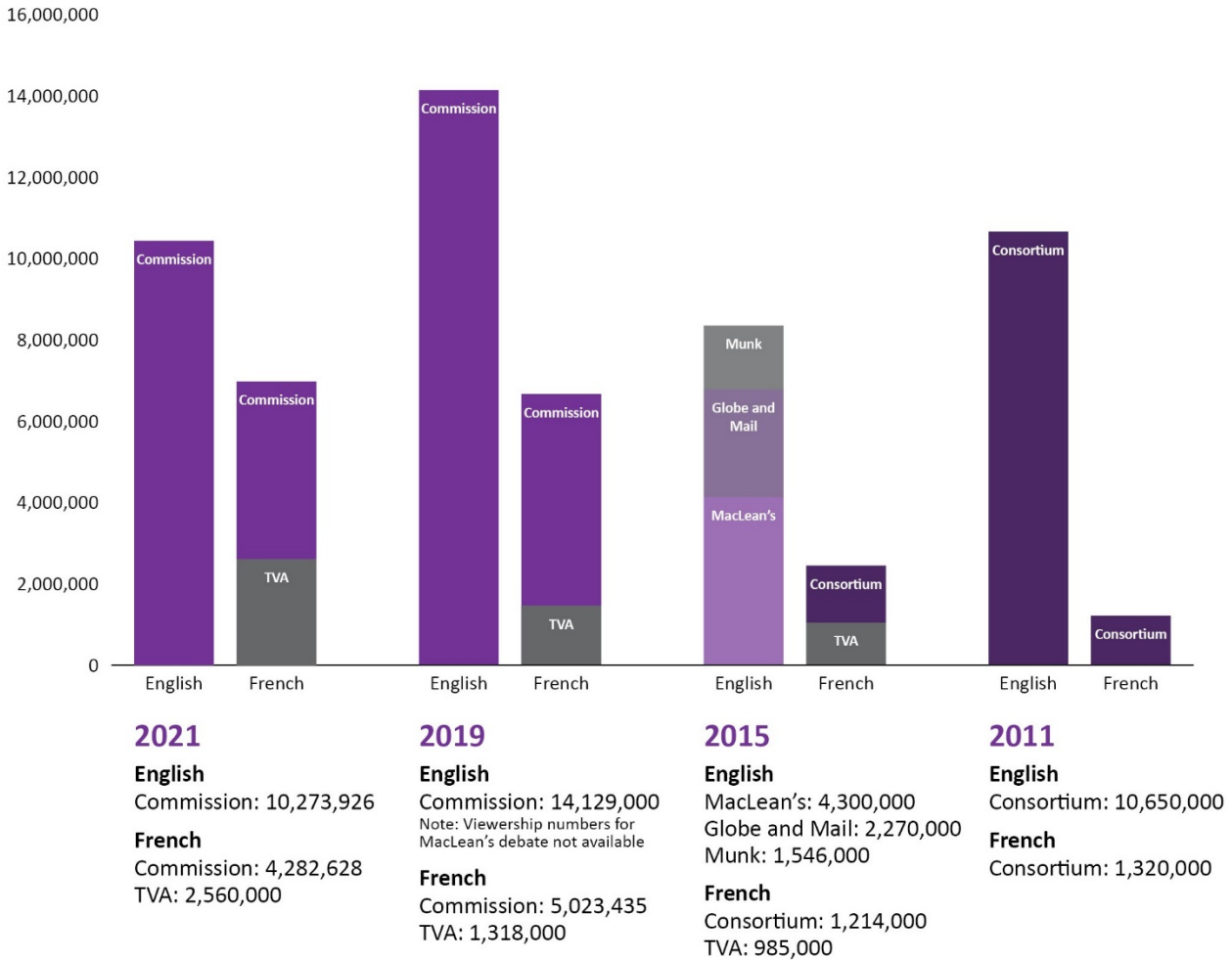
While the 2021 debates viewership numbers are still high - almost as many people watched the debate as voted in 2021 – the numbers are not as high as in 2019. There are a number of possible factors. First, the 2021 federal election was not held on a fixed election date, it was a “snap election.” According to Nanos Research, three-quarters of Canadians felt the 2021 election was “unnecessary.”⁵² Second, the debates producer – the Debate Broadcast Group (DBG) - indicated that the decline in viewership numbers is in line with a general downward trend in television ratings. And, finally, the 2021 voter turnout suggests that Canadians may have been less engaged than they were in 2019. Voter turnout was 67% in 2019 and 62.5% in 2021.

Still, the debates reached a large number of Canadians in a variety of different languages and formats. They were available on television, radio, social media (Facebook, Twitter), third party platforms (YouTube), over-the-top (OTT) digital platforms, apps as well as dozens of other websites.

The next few tables show a breakdown of who watched the debates, where and how.

⁵² <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/politics/article-poll-shows-three-quarters-of-canadians-dont-see-the-election-as/>

Debate viewership

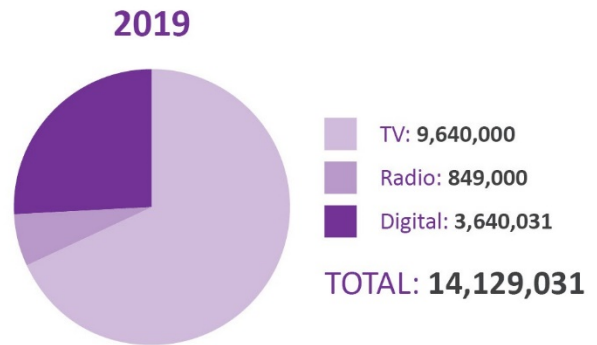
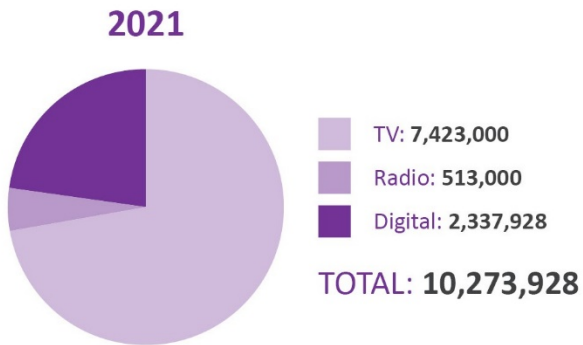


The total of 10,273,926 for the English debate includes radio listeners (513,000), digital viewers (2,337,928) and TV viewers (7,423,000). As such, it is possible that the 10,273,926 could include some people who watched on more than one device at the same time. For television the total of 7,423,000 is the total number of viewers over the 120-minute duration. The average minute audience (AMA) was 2,638,000.

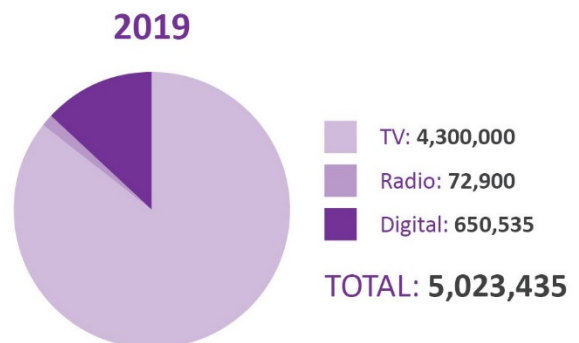
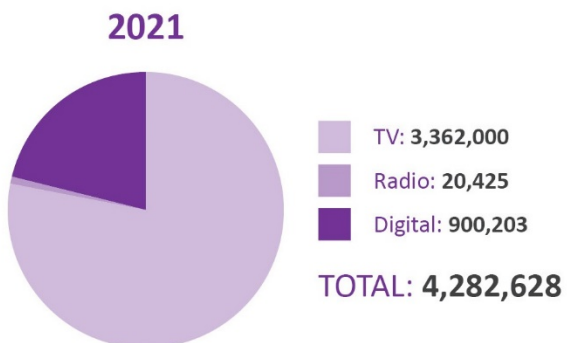
The total of 4,282,628 for the French debate includes radio listeners (20,425), digital viewers (900,203) and TV viewers (3,362,000). As such, it is possible that the 4,282,628 could include some people who watched on more than one device at the same time. For television the total of 3,362,000 is the total number of viewers over the 120-minute duration. The average minute audience (AMA) was 1,247,000.

TV vs Radio vs Digital

ENGLISH



FRENCH



Digital viewership

ENGLISH

2021



- YouTube: 1,824,704
- Twitter: 58,951
- Facebook: 4,471
- DBG Owned and Operated: 449,802

TOTAL: 2,337,928

2019



- YouTube: 1,698,008
- Twitter: 700,198
- Facebook: 658,423
- CDPP Owned and Operated: 583,402

TOTAL: 3,640,031

FRENCH

2021



- YouTube: 657,306
- Twitter: 5,400
- Facebook: 74,763
- DBG Owned and Operated: 162,734

TOTAL: 900,203

2019



- YouTube: 254,904
- Twitter: 106,514
- Facebook: 169,118
- CDPP Owned and Operated: 119,999

TOTAL: 650,535