General Election 2019

The role of televised debates in persuading voters to back Boris

18th December

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Introduction

In 2010, 10.3 million viewers watched the first televised debate with Gordon Brown, Nick Clegg and David Cameron. Nearly ten years on, the number of viewers has reduced but remains high - 6.7m tuend in to ITV's Leaders' Debate and 4.23m for BBC's Question Time Special. This report explores the role of televised debates through combining polling with social media and biometric sensor data collected specifically for the final PrimeMinisterial debate on 6th December 2019. Our analysis suggests the debates were a key battleground victory for Boris.

The analysis draws on three data sources:

An **online survey** of 1,134 adults aged 18+ in Great Britain. Fieldwork was conducted 6th – 9th December 2019.	Use of **Galvanic Skin Response (GSR) sensors** among 49 participants watching the PrimeMinisterial debate (6th Dec) in their own home. GSR sensors capture sweat gland activity, which is a reliable index of emotional response.	Analysis of 11,061 comments posted on **social media** during the Prime Ministerial debate on 6th Dec (between 8-10pm) that explicitly referenced the debate.

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On balance, the debates were seen as interesting and engaging to viewers – more than celebrity entertainment – but only a minority said it changed their minds

According to our survey, though viewers were sceptical of whether voters were the primary beneficiaries of the televised debates, they were likely to agree that the format was interesting and engaging (47% agree vs 25% disagree), and that the debates contained high quality discussion (41% agree vs 28% disagree).

This is supported by biometric sensor data, which tracked the emotional arousal of viewers. Overall, the programme received an emotional impact score of 13.04. This is a relatively high score: not as high as live sporting events (which typically receive an average score of 16-26), but considerably higher compared to prime-time celebrity entertainment shows (an average score of 11).
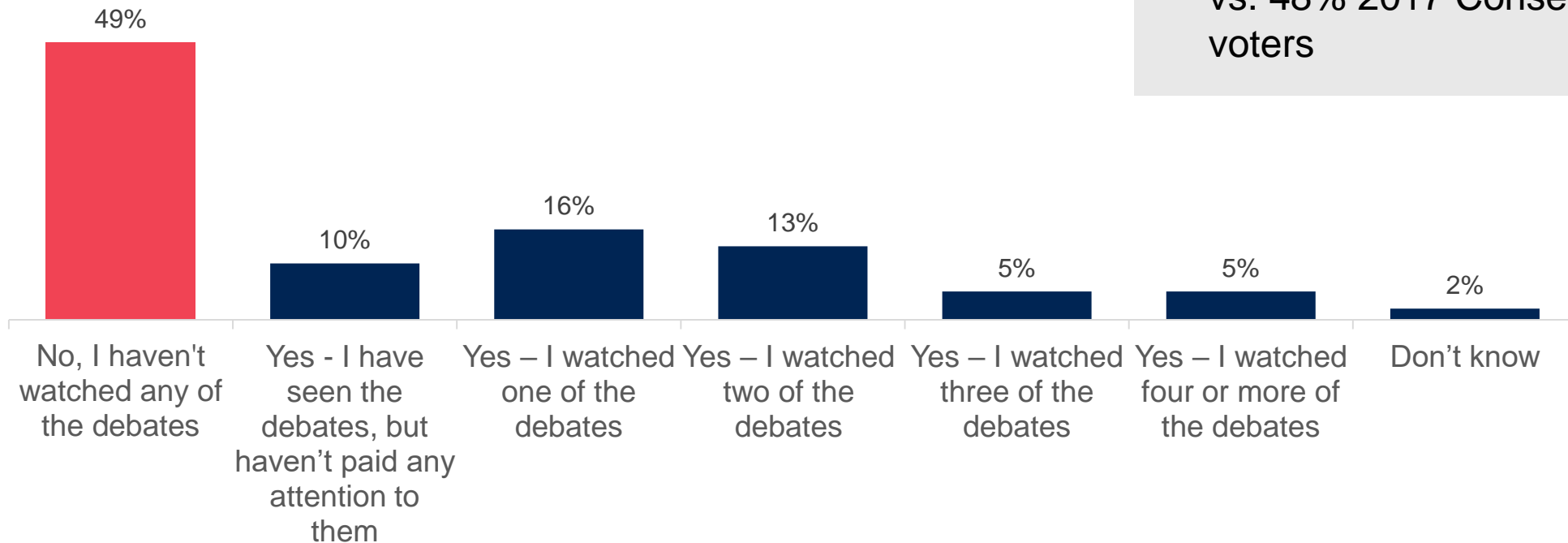
For most viewers, the debates were purely a form of entertainment that didn't impact on their vote choice. However, of those who watched the debates, a fifth (21%) said it helped them choose or switch parties – this was more so the case for younger viewers and those who voted Labour in 2017.

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The debates attracted more interest from younger voters and 2017 Labour voters (though recall is likely to attract some level of overclaim)

Have you personally watched any of the televised debates, or not?

% Yes to watching at least one
- 61% aged 18-34 vs. 40% aged 55+
- 62% among 2017 Labour voters vs. 48% 2017 Conservative voters

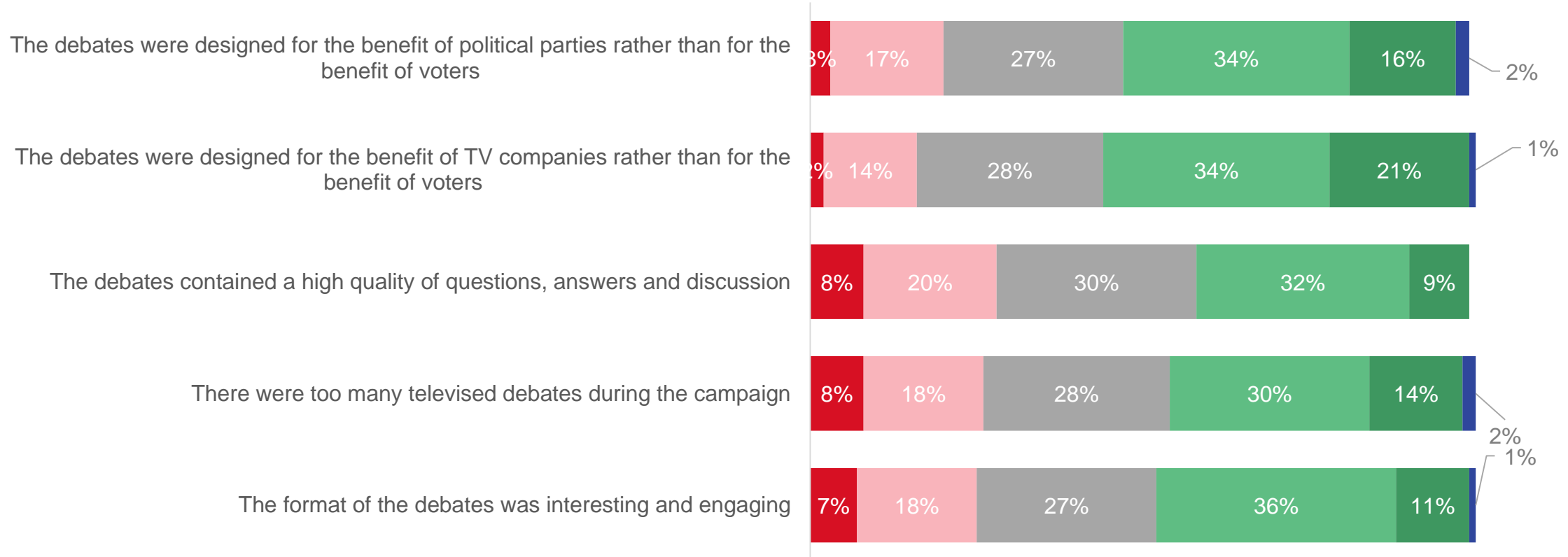|	
49%	No, I haven't watched any of the debates
10%	Yes - I have seen the debates, but haven't paid any attention to them
16%	Yes – I watched one of the debates
13%	Yes – I watched two of the debates
5%	Yes – I watched three of the debates
5%	Yes – I watched four or more of the debates
2%	Don't know

Base: Adults aged 18+ in Great Britain (1,134)

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Viewers more likely than not to think the format was engaging and that discussion was high quality; though some scepticism over beneficiaries

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements about the televised debates?

■ Strongly disagree   ■ Tend to disagree   ■ Neither agree nor disagree   ■ Tend to agree   ■ Strongly agree   ■ Don't know

Statement	Strongly disagree	Tend to disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Tend to agree	Strongly agree	Don't know
The debates were designed for the benefit of political parties rather than for the benefit of voters	3%	17%	27%	34%	16%	2%
The debates were designed for the benefit of TV companies rather than for the benefit of voters	2%	14%	28%	34%	21%	1%
The debates contained a high quality of questions, answers and discussion	8%	20%	30%	32%	9%	
There were too many televised debates during the campaign	8%	18%	28%	30%	14%	2%
The format of the debates was interesting and engaging	7%	18%	27%	36%	11%	1%

Base: Adults who watched at least one televised debate in Great Britain (467)

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For most viewers, the debates had no impact or reinforced existing support; however, 21% of viewers claimed it helped them choose or switch parties

Which of the following statements do you most agree with?

Statement	%
The debates had no impact on how I intend to vote	42%
The debates encouraged me to vote for the party I already support	26%
The debates made me change from being undecided to choosing to vote for one of the parties represented	11%
The debates encouraged me to switch my vote from one party to another	10%
The debates put me off voting for any party	8%
Don't know	2%
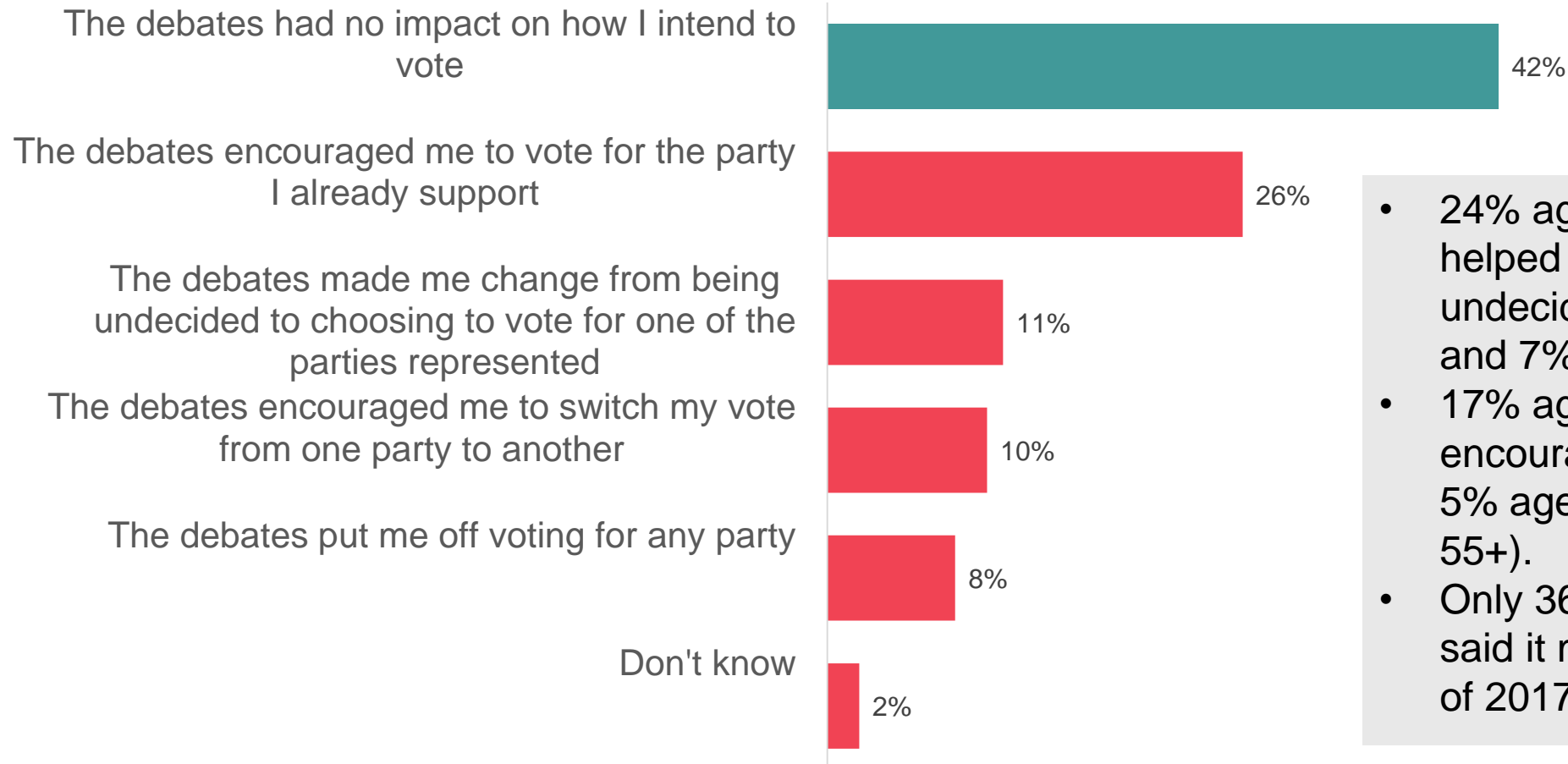
- 24% aged 18-34 said debates helped change from being undecided (vs. 5% aged 35-54 and 7% aged).
- 17% aged 18-34 said debates encouraged them to switch (vs. 5% aged 35-54 and 9% aged 55+).
- Only 36% of 2017 Labour voters said it made no impact, (vs. 49% of 2017 Conservative voters).

Base: Adults who watched at least one televised debate in Great Britain (467)

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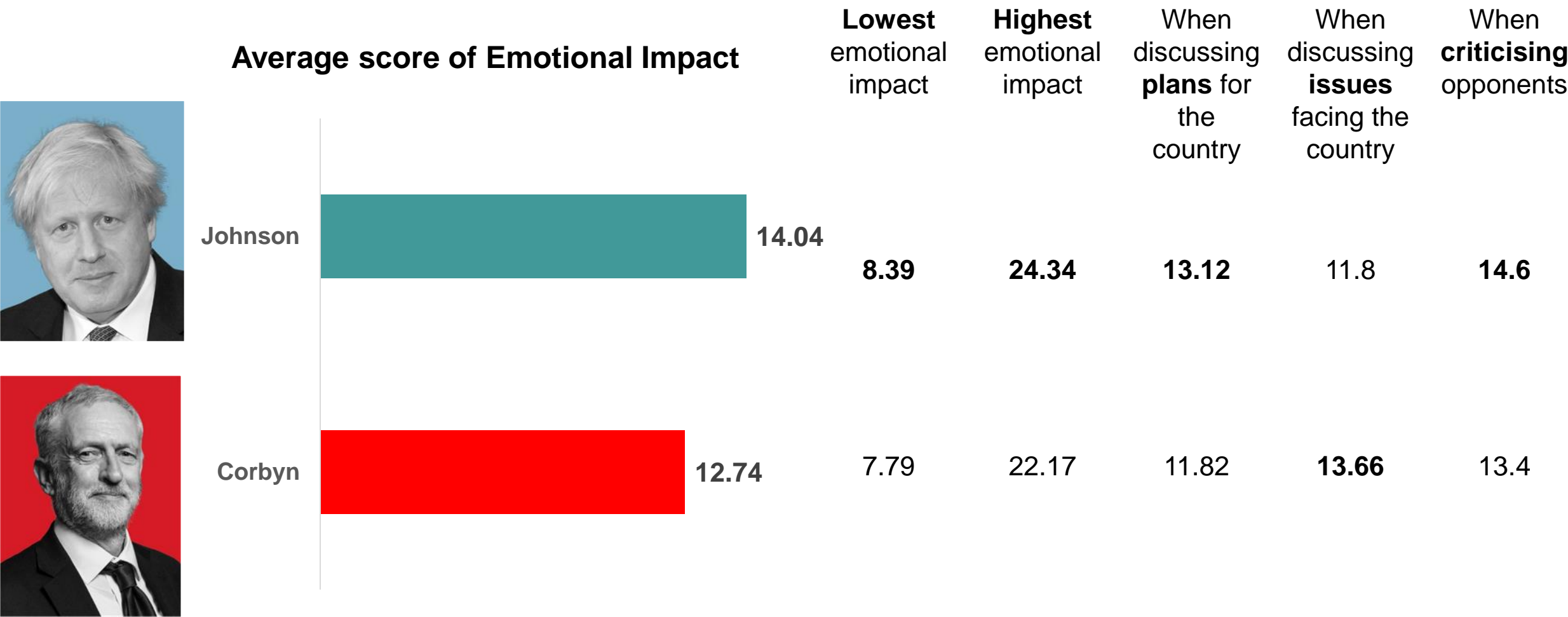# Biometric sensor data shows Boris was a clear winner, and suggests viewers were tired of Brexit debate

The GSR sensors show that Johnson secured greater moments of emotional intensity throughout the debate. He captured greater engagement from participants in discussing his plans for the country, but he was also particularly effective at criticising Corbyn. Through the polling, debate viewers had identified criticising opponents as the element of debates they liked the least; however, the GSR sensors suggest that if done well, these moments are critical to galvanising viewers.

The performance of Johnson was vindicated in the reflections of participants, who overall felt that Johnson had performed better than Corbyn (52% vs 48%).

Social media data suggests Brexit was a key area of debate, though biometric sensor data shows that viewers were largely tired of the detail. Brexit received the lowest score of emotional impact of all policy issues; and was a particular moment of low emotional intensity for Corbyn.

However, the debates also pointed to a clear victory for truth and honesty. The final few questions of the debate which discussed hate and trust in politics were by far the highest moments of emotional intensity captured during the debate. This was most associated with Johnson on social media, suggesting that honesty will be a key issue in defining the success of Johnson's premiership.

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Johnson secured more emotional intensity from viewers on almost every measure – particularly when criticising Corbyn

	Average score of Emotional Impact	**Lowest** emotional impact	**Highest** emotional impact	When discussing **plans** for the country	When discussing **issues** facing the country	When **criticising** opponents
Johnson	14.04	8.39	24.34	13.12	11.8	14.6
Corbyn	12.74	7.79	22.17	11.82	13.66	13.4

Emotional Impact score is based on averaged SCR: standardized number of skin conductance responses for each second of the content. Fieldwork conducted with 49 adults aged 18+ on 6th December 2019 in response to the BBC PrimeMinisterial debate.

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Viewers claimed to enjoy questions put to politicians, but not moments when they criticised their opponents

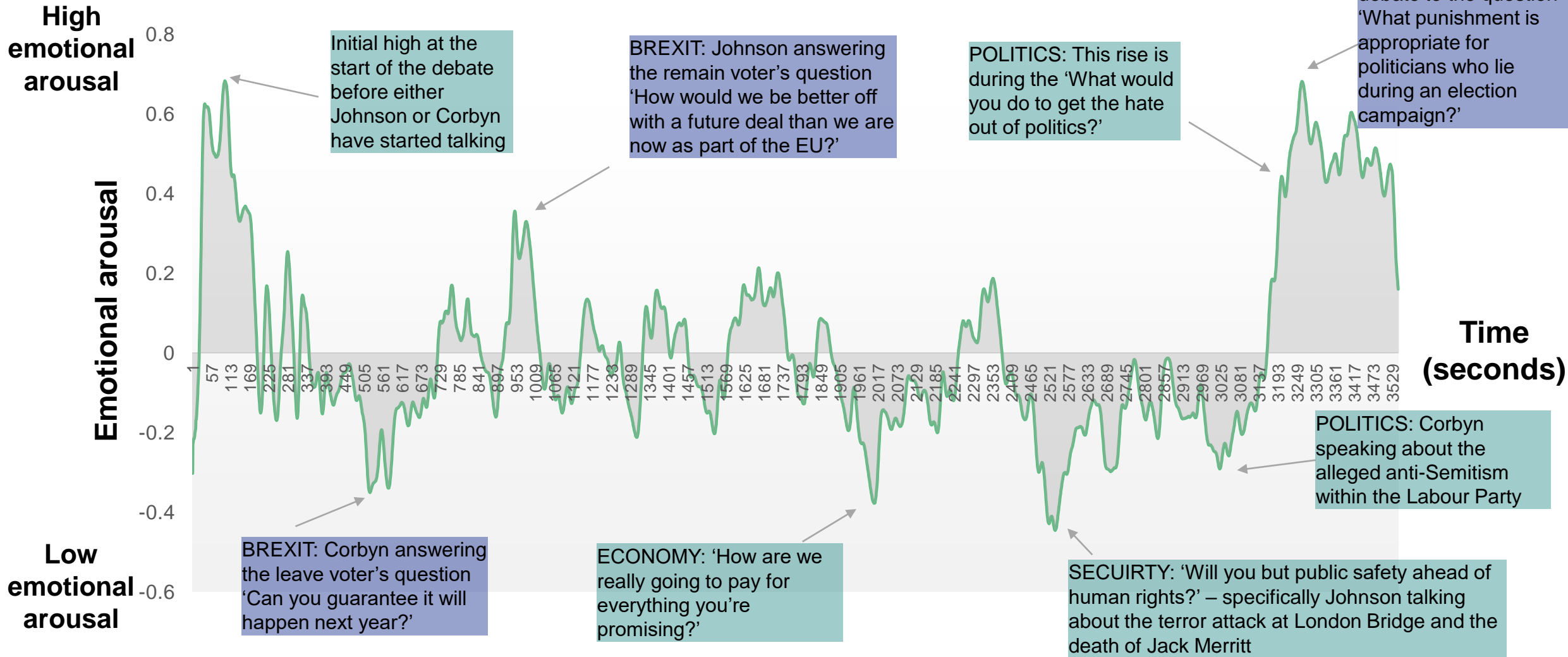■ Thinking back to the format of the debates you watched. In general, which of the following moments did you like the MOST?

■ Thinking back to the format of the debates you watched. In general, which of the following moments did you like the LEAST?

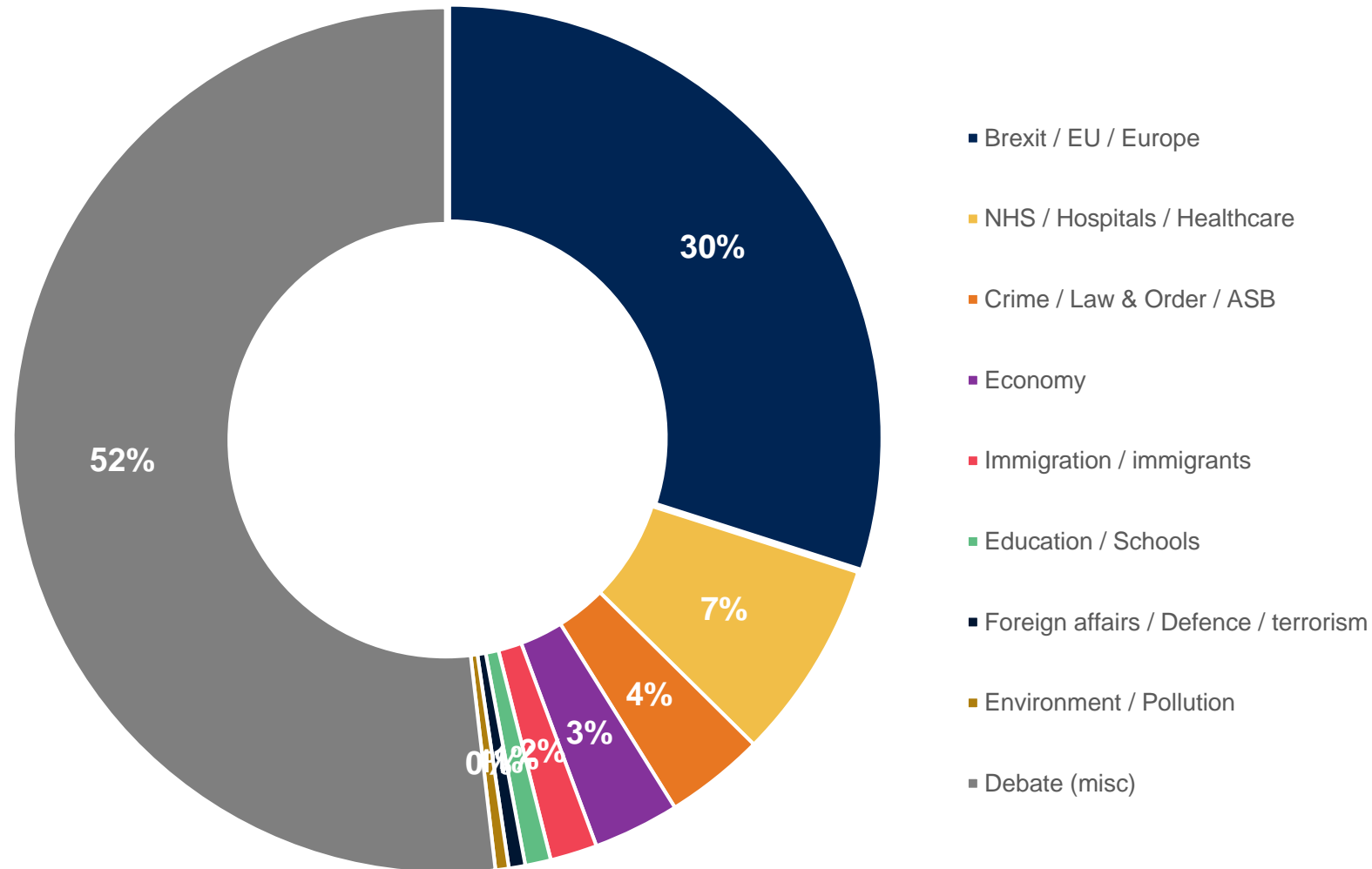| Category	MOST	LEAST
Questions put to politicians by the audience	46%	11%
When the politicians were discussing issues facing the country	29%	8%
When the politicians were talking about their plans for the country	27%	11%
Open discussion and debate between politicians	26%	13%
Questions put to politicians by the chair of the debate	23%	14%
When the politicians were criticising their opponents	14%	44%
Opening or closing statements from politicians	12%	19%
When the politicians were talking about their own character and experiences	12%	25%
None of these	7%	9%
Don't know	3%	4%

Base: Adults who watched at least one televised debate in Great Britain (467)

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Credibility & trust receive highest emotional intensity at the expense of key issues, whilst Johnson performs better on Brexit than Corbyn
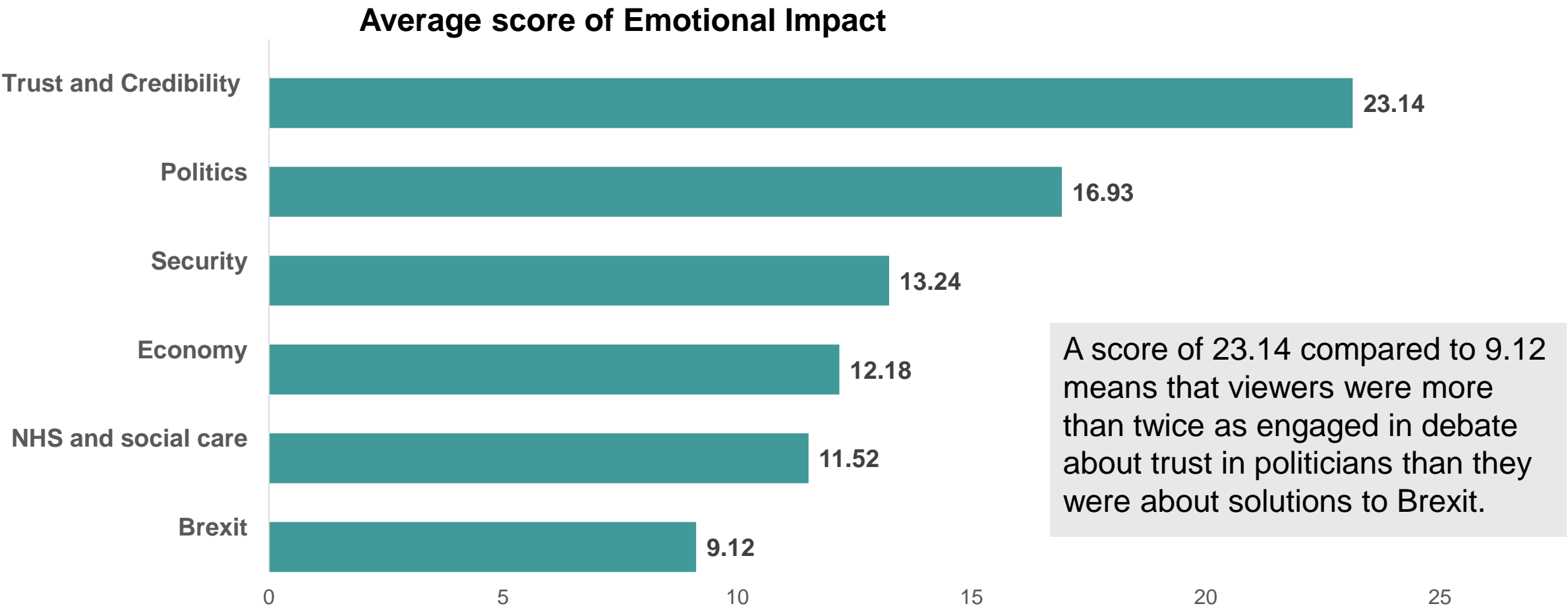

High emotional arousal

Low emotional arousal

Emotional arousal

Time (seconds)

Initial high at the start of the debate before either Johnson or Corbyn have started talking

BREXIT: Johnson answering the remain voter's question 'How would we be better off with a future deal than we are now as part of the EU?'

POLITICS: This rise is during the 'What would you do to get the hate out of politics?'

CREDIBILITY: Highest peak during the actual debate to the question 'What punishment is appropriate for politicians who lie during an election campaign?'

POLITICS: Corbyn speaking about the alleged anti-Semitism within the Labour Party

BREXIT: Corbyn answering the leave voter's question 'Can you guarantee it will happen next year?'

ECONOMY: 'How are we really going to pay for everything you're promising?'

SECUIRTY: 'Will you but public safety ahead of human rights?' – specifically Johnson talking about the terror attack at London Bridge and the death of Jack Merritt

Emotional Arousal score is based on electrodermal activity analysis analysis on a scale of -1.0 - +1.0, where +1 is the most positive emotional response and -1 is the most negative response. This is calculated using standardized EDA: a measure of variance within subject tonic activity during the debate

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According to mentions on social media, this was the Brexit election – it received nearly twice as many mentions than all other domestic issues put together

Legend:
- Brexit / EU / Europe
- NHS / Hospitals / Healthcare
- Crime / Law & Order / ASB
- Economy
- Immigration / immigrants
- Education / Schools
- Foreign affairs / Defence / terrorism
- Environment / Pollution
- Debate (misc)

Pie chart values: 30%, 52%, 7%, 4%, 3%, 2%, 0%

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However, viewers appeared tired of Brexit debate – this received the lowest score of emotional impact

Average score of Emotional Impact

Category	Score
Trust and Credibility	23.14
Politics	16.93
Security	13.24
Economy	12.18
NHS and social care	11.52
Brexit	9.12

A score of 23.14 compared to 9.12 means that viewers were more than twice as engaged in debate about trust in politicians than they were about solutions to Brexit.

Emotional Impact score is based on averaged SCR: standardized number of skin conductance responses for each second of the content. Fieldwork conducted with 49 adults aged 18+ on 6th December 2019 in response to the BBC PrimeMinisterial debate.

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Brexit was a key point of difference in what viewers said they 'liked" –though this doesn't always map to strength of emotional arousal on key issues

High volume of 'likes'

High volume of 'dislikes'

Average stated sentiment

Time (seconds)

BREXIT: Discussing the Irish boarders

SECURITY: In relation to the terror attack at London Bridge and Johnson speaking of ensuring that convicted terrorists serve their full sentence.

Highest emotional response: punishing politicians who lie

BREXIT: Corbyn speaking about the importance of securing the best deal for the UK

NHS: Discussing the shortage of nurses and accusations of privatising the NHS

Lowest emotional response: putting safety before human rights – here view are saying they either *like* or *dislike* what's been said

0.1
0.08
0.06
0.04
0.02
0
-0.02
-0.04
-0.06
-0.08
-0.1

1 54 107 160 213 266 319 372 425 478 531 584 637 690 743 796 849 902 955 1008 1061 1114 1167 1220 1273 1326 1379 1432 1485 1538 1591 1644 1697 1750 1803 1856 1909 1962 2015 2068 2121 2174 2227 2280 2333 2386 2439 2492 2545 2598 2651 2704 2757 2810 2863 2916 2969 3022 3075 3128 3181 3234 3287 3340 3393 3446 3499

Stated Sentiment score is based on the average of Likes and Dislikes that participants stated they felt through the app, on a scale of -1.0 - +1.0, where +1 is the most positive emotional response and -1 is the most negative response.

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Technical note – introduction to Galvanic Skin Response sensors

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Introduction to Galvanic Skin Response sensors

The nervous system responds in a number of ways to the world around us: our pupils dilate, our body temperate and blood pressure change. Monitoring physiological response can tell us about our interaction with the world and our response to stimuli.

The emotional intensity of a response can be measured using a biometric technique known **as Galvanic Skin Response (GSR)**. GSR refers to changes in sweat gland activity (usually measured in the palm of the hand or fingertips) that indicate the level of emotional arousal in response to stimuli that we are exposed to.

Although we can understand the level of emotional arousal in response to stimuli, GSR does not provide whether the response is **positive or negative**. To capture this, participants used a **like/dislike rating** which they could provide at any point in their viewing of the debate.

A combination of this with the GSR response allowed us to understand how the two politicians were perceived and also how they were perceived in relation to the topics that they were discussing.

The study was conducted in partnership with MindProber, who were responsible for conducting the GSR analysis. Throughout the report we use two measures:
*   Emotional Intensity: standardized electrodermal activity (EDA) – a measure of variance within subject tonic activity during the debate;
*   Emotional Impact: averaged skin conductive response (SCR) – standardised number of skin conductance responses for each second of the content.

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