

GENERAL ELECTION
 2010

The Leaders' Debates

The worms' final verdict – lessons to be learned

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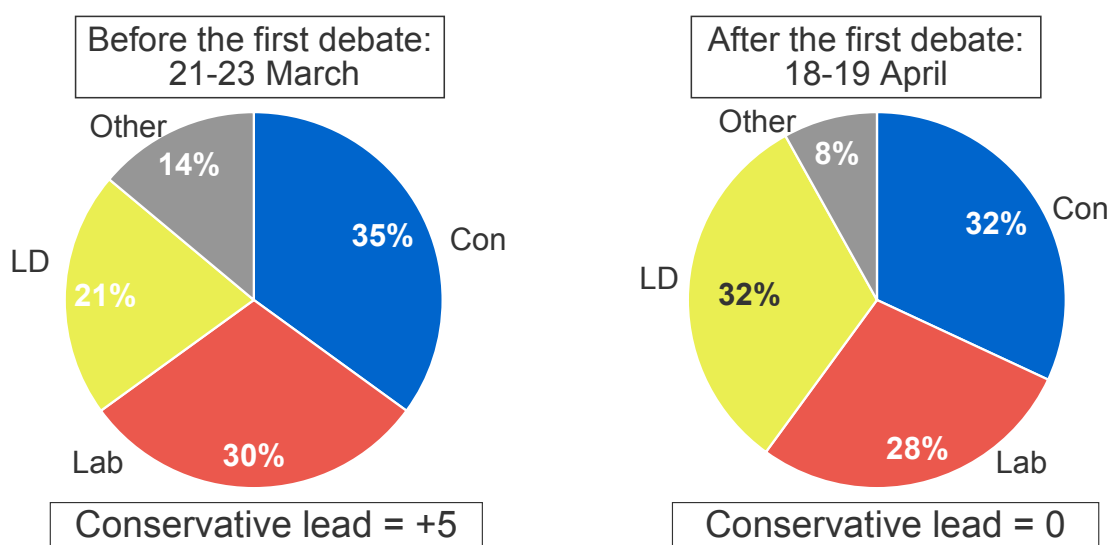
The impact of the three debates on the 2010 General Election

Before the first ever debate of its kind in a British General Election, six in ten (60%) said the debates would be important to them in helping who to decide to vote for – with all three debates now completed, Ipsos MORI's analysis illustrates the effect they have had.

Having shared equal air time with the other two parties, the Liberal Democrats – and Nick Clegg – managed to reach more members of the public than ever before. The impact was striking with the Liberal Democrats enjoying an unprecedented boost in the polls – as shown below.

National Voting Intention: the impact of the first debate

How would you vote if there were a General Election tomorrow?



Base: All certain to vote = 833 unweighted; data collected among 1,503 British adults 18+, 19th-22nd March 2010
Ipsos MORI

Base: All certain to vote = 802 unweighted; data collected among 1,253 British adults 18+, 18th-19th April 2010
Source: Ipsos MORI Political Monitor Ipsos

However, when we look at the influence people say the debates have had on how they intend to vote, almost half of people who watched the first or second debates say the experience has had no impact on how they will vote. Yet the other half - who say it has either confirmed their existing voting intention, encouraged them to switch to a different party or helped them make their mind up about who to vote for – have altered the course of this campaign. There is still much to play for – half say they may still change their mind before May 6th, which is unprecedented at this stage of an election, and almost twice the level at the same stage in 1997.

What lessons can future leaders from the debates of 2010?

Lesson One: Don't go negative

Attacking the other leaders and their policies does not work with floating voters – the public do not like the negative politics employed at times by all three of the leaders. This was never more evident than in David Cameron's closing statement of the final debate. Having enjoyed a strong performance throughout the debate Cameron began his final pitch to the public on a

positive note about how important families are, but when he changed tack to criticising the other parties the worm (depicting the reaction of the audience) began falling.

Cameron was not the only leader guilty of negative attacks. Brown's worm fell to its lowest trough in the second debate when he questioned the readiness the others to govern and directly confronted Cameron, accusing him of being a "risk" to the country while telling Nick Clegg to "get real". Interestingly, Nick Clegg – particularly in the first two debates when he was still not seen as a 'typical' politician – was allowed more space by our audiences to attack the 'established politicians' without adversely affecting his ratings.

Of course, we need to bear in mind that the leaders are not only talking to these undecided voters in the debates – they are also trying to ensure their own supporters actually get out and vote. Gordon Brown's curious final statement in the last debate clearly flouted the "stay positive" advice and focused heavily on the risks posed by change – but was probably aimed at galvanising those already sympathetic to Labour.

Lesson Two: Personal stories don't work

Whatever the expensive American experts tell you, the British public don't care about who you met – or who you went for a jog with. All three party leaders were guilty of attempting 'folksy charm' often used in American politics to humanise the politicians. Personal stories about meeting members of the public, nurses or war veterans failed to score well with members of our audiences.

Lesson Three: Talk about capping immigration, sacking MPs and cutting waste

The worms were at their absolute highest when Cameron spoke on immigration – in particular that it is too high and there is a need to cap it – and when both of the opposition leaders spoke about cutting government waste and sacking MPs.

One in three (29%) see immigration as one of the most important issues facing Britain while 14% say it will be very important to them when deciding who to vote for. With immigration being raised in each of the three debates, Cameron – whose party the public overwhelmingly think has the best policies on immigration – scored best with the audiences on the issue.

Nick Clegg made the most of his standing in the first two debates as an 'outsider' of established politics and his worm went up when he spoke about the "disgrace" of the expenses scandals. His policy of allowing the public to sack MPs was very popular with the worm.

Our audiences also liked it when both Cameron and Clegg bemoaned the waste in government spending – which is not surprising, given how inefficient many of the public consider the government, as our polling data shows.

Lesson Four: Presentation is key

These debates have been criticised for lowering the tone of campaigning to style over substance. Indeed it is true that the presentation of the arguments is key and we know that the way people absorb information is overwhelmingly about presentation rather than content. By this measure, Gordon Brown tended to struggle with the audiences simply for how he came across, while Clegg's personality won him over with some of our undecided audience members – as the quotes from our participants illustrate:

“Gordon Brown didn't seem to put things over well” (Male)

“I think Clegg just edged it - more personable and on top of that he came across as a bit more light-hearted which politics needs” (Male)

The worm itself

The worm seems to have taken on a life of its own during this election campaign. For each debate, Ipsos MORI has recruited 36 undecided voters in the city where the debate takes place for the BBC News at Ten, each watching one of the three leaders, to give their reactions as they watched the debate unfold live. To watch the coverage of the last debate follow this link: http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/election_2010/8653068.stm

The debates were a first for British politics and the worm was an innovative way of capturing audiences' immediate sentiments to words, phrases and presentation during the debate. Rather than looking to crown a 'winner' of the debates, the worm showed what people liked and disliked as the debates unfolded.

For a more light-hearted approach writer and comedian AL Kennedy has written two speeches for BBC Radio 4's Today programme, [one designed to charm The Worm](#), and [the other to worry it](#) based on the findings from the first two debates.

For more coverage see the BBC Election website:

http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/election_2010/default.stm

For more on Ipsos MORI's data, visit our election webpage:

<http://www.ipsos-mori.com/researchspecialisms/socialresearch/specareas/politics/generalelection2010.aspx>

Notes to editors

Ipsos MORI recruited 36 undecided voters in each city that the debate was taking place. Participants were recruited to achieve a broad demographic mix based on gender, age, social grade and ethnicity as well as voting behaviour. Participants used IML voting pads to record their reactions whilst watching the debate live. Three 'worms' - one for each leader - tracked participants' attitudes towards each of the three leaders throughout the debate, illustrating visually their 'high' and 'low' points according to undecided voters.

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