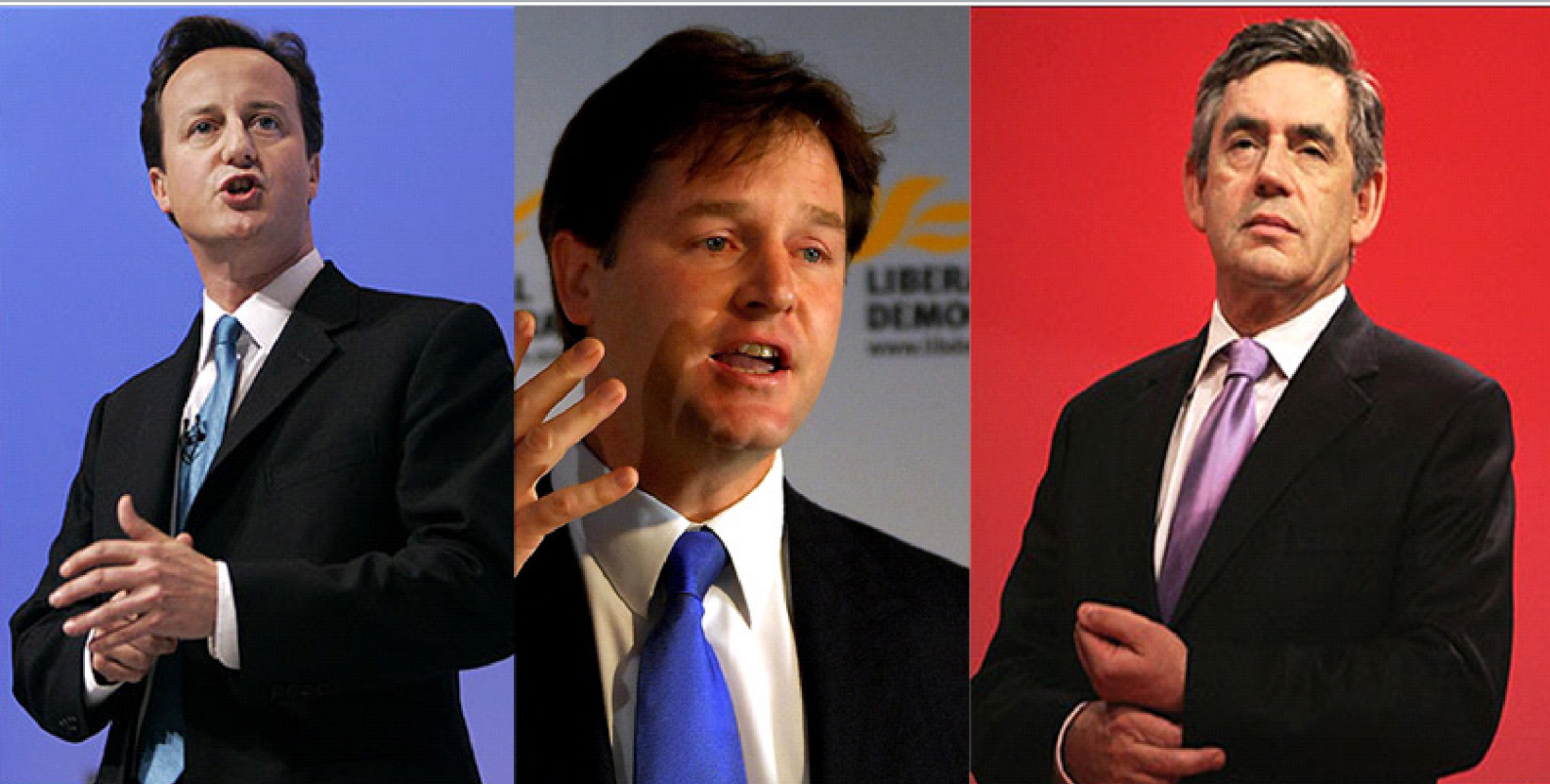


GENERAL ELECTION
 2010

The Leaders' Debates

Immediate public reaction – Clegg wins the first round

16 April 2010



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Round one to Nick Clegg...

For the first time ever in a General Election campaign, the leaders of the main parties in British politics shared a stage - broadcast live on television and radio - and debated domestic affairs. Its impact is potentially huge; watched by 6 million people, three in five say that the debates will be important in helping them to decide how to vote. Leaders are now as important as policies in how people say they will vote, and we know that in previous elections, debates between leaders were the top influence upon how people voted – more so than newspaper coverage of the campaigns or television news. And people are still willing to be influenced - almost half of voters in key marginal constituencies say they may still change their mind. So the debates are probably the key remaining 'wildcard' in this election.

Ipsos MORI recruited 36 undecided voters for the BBC News at Ten, each watching one of the three leaders, to give their reactions as they watched the debate unfold live.

There were no major gaffes or triumphs – but the main story of the night is clear: Nick Clegg is widely being lauded as the 'winner'. And this is backed up by our research, with his ratings among undecided voters getting the highest and most frequent peaks.

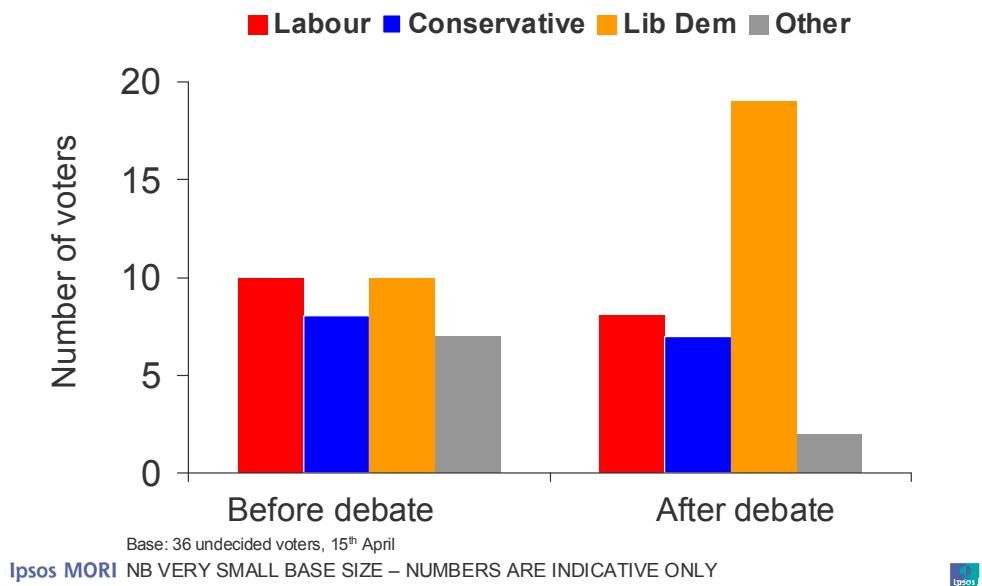


Clegg's high points included his thoughts on immigration (regional quotas in particular), 'colleges of crime', and his thoughts about the creativity and freedom needed for teachers. On the other hand, people did not rate his views on Trident being cut. Importantly, his ratings increased significantly when he criticised the two 'main' parties' failure to act on issues such as MPs expenses and political reform. He told viewers that 'it is not good enough' and presented himself as one-step removed from the rotten political system. Clegg's position as the 'third party' allowed him to align himself with the voting public and express their frustration at the other two parties: "the more the two of them attack each other, the more they sound the same".

"I came in undecided, didn't know much about Nick Clegg. I was very impressed by him. He was very specific about what he felt they would do. The other two seemed to concentrate on slugging each other off" (Female)

"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)

Voting intentions - before and after

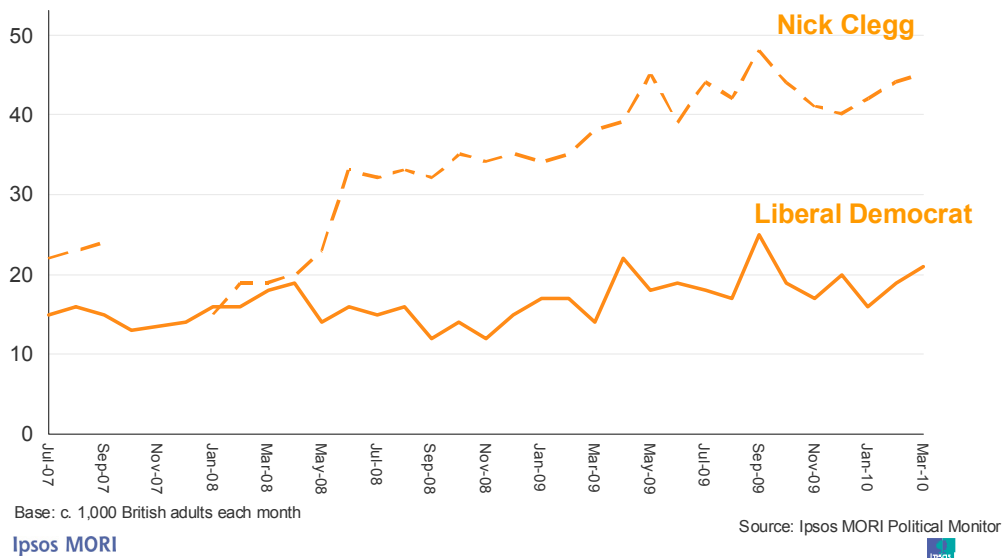


The debate presented a great opportunity for Clegg, and as we pointed out in previous analysis, he was always likely to gain the most just through sheer airtime given his lower public profile. Our March Political Monitor showed that one in three voters (30%) do not currently have an opinion about him; positioning himself on an equal footing to the two main parties can only help.

“I was very surprised by Nick Clegg” (Female)

However, our polling shows that even before the debates Clegg has been increasing his public standing, and currently has the highest satisfaction ratings of the three leaders, and is already seen as the most honest (27%, compared to 25% who say Cameron and 19% who say Brown).

Clegg's positive personal ratings have not increased Lib Dem vote share



But as the chart above shows, Clegg's increasing popularity prior to the debates was not translating into votes; the Lib Dem vote share has hovered around 20% for several months. The debates may provide the final push for the Lib Dems to make that leap in convincing significant proportions of the population they are a viable alternative, but it's probably wise not to predict too much into one night. On the one hand, further exposure in the news in the coming days in response to his victory and the remaining debates themselves are all likely to help. But on the other hand, the novelty factor is likely to wear off, and the other two parties will be working hard to come up with better ways of countering Clegg and his policies.

Cameron was expected to perform best in these debates by over half of the public (53%). He started strongly on crime and immigration, which are issues where the Conservatives are already seen to have the best policies (33% and 28% of the public say they have the best policies on these respective issues). His ratings peaked when he talked about the need to reform welfare so immigrants have less access.



In general, however, Cameron's peaks and troughs were not as dramatic as for Clegg, but at least Cameron's 'worm' went up and down more than Brown's - suggesting maybe mixed views, and reflecting what we see in the polls, that people are yet to be fully convinced.

Indeed, our data shows that while Cameron is seen as the most capable Prime Minister (38%, compared to 29% who say Brown and 12% who say Clegg), his rating on this measure has fallen since September last year when he had a 17% point lead compared to 9% now. Indeed, his party are seen ready to govern by 49%, but this is fewer people than said the same about Blair's Labour in 1997 (55%).

“David Cameron was a bit too obsequious. There was a lot about 'aren't you wonderful in the army' without actually answering the question” (Female)

“I thought David Cameron was the stronger candidate - just seemed to make most sense. Think his personality came across better than the other two” (Male)

Brown's 'worm' saw the least movement. Every time he talked about his party's track record the worm went down (people didn't believe him) and his comments about the future were also apparently overshadowed by people's views on his track record.

“It was really a two horse race between Clegg and Cameron I thought. Gordon Brown came across as very much the grey man. Suppose he's got a record he's got to justify whereas the others don't have that problem” (Male)

His joke at Cameron's expense did not work particularly well with our audience, and his tendency to smile when under attack looks nervous and/or dismissive and did not go down well. He got a 'peak' near the end of the debate when talking about the need for urgent reform in social care and making it free instead of means-tested. His dips included his views on policing; the public did not respond well to his plans for failing police forces to be turned round with the help of other forces. Neither did people appear to like his comments about investment in the armed forces. We know that Labour are currently seen to have the best policies on health (33% compared to 24% who say Conservative and 9% who say Lib Dem) and unemployment (30%, compared to 24% and 7%). Yet during the debate his comments on these issues did not appear to resonate with undecided voters.

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

“I think Gordon Brown was a bit of a let down” (Male)

A key issue where no party has a clear lead in the polls is the economy, which is also the most important issue, helping almost a third of people decide how to vote (32%). There did not seem to be a clear winner in the debate, but we will hear much more about this in the final debate which will focus on the economy specifically.

And there were other general lessons from the debates that analysts will be unpicking in the days ahead. Our research confirms some of the things you might expect – for example, attacking the other leaders and speaking over time did not go down well. More interestingly, none of the leaders benefited greatly when mentioning their family or personal lives – during

personal anecdotes, our 'worm' either flat-lined or dipped. This may be an important part of "humanising" the leaders, but they should be careful not to overdo it.

Instant reaction polls on who 'won' the debate chime with our more detailed qualitative analysis, with most giving it to Clegg by a distance (although the percentages vary greatly). But the real effect on voting intention will come over the next few days, as secondary media coverage filters through to a much larger proportion of the population.

It is clear from our polling that there is a clear appetite for change in British politics. Three-quarters of the public want a fresh team of leaders (75%), and 57% want a Prime Minister who can bring fresh thinking and a new approach. Clegg tapped into this sentiment most effectively, but whether he can sustain this and translate it into votes is now to be one of the key questions of the election.

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 from the Manchester area. Participants were recruited to achieve a broad demographic mix based on gender, age, social grade and ethnicity as well voting behaviour. Participants used IML voting pads to record their reactions whilst watching the debate live.

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