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First Televised Election Debates in the United Kingdom

KEY WORDS

election debate, United Kingdom, 2010 elections, mediatisation of politics

ABSTRACT

The article discusses the circumstances surrounding the first British televised election debates of April 2010, attended by the leaders of the three main political parties: the Labour Party, the Conservative Party and the Liberal Democrats. Though the idea of such debates was discussed since 1964, controversies surrounding them caused that they were not held until recently – exactly half a century after the famous Nixon–Kennedy debate in the United States. The article provides an analysis of arguments for and against debates (as such). A particular emphasis is put on their consequences for the British political scene. While their ultimate impact on the election results has been limited, the debates have nevertheless become a sign of Britain turning away from the two-party political system as well as of the ‘presidentialisation’ of its political regime. Another essential post-debate effect has been the ‘mediatisation’ of British politics, in which various aspects of a political leader’s (media) image play an increasingly important role.

The fact that the first televised election debates in British history, held on 15, 22 and 29 April 2010, took place exactly half a century after the historical presidential debate Nixon–Kennedy grows to the rank of a specific symbol.

Such a late introduction of this element of the election campaign in the UK may be surprising, taking into account that TV debates are a permanent part of the electoral landscape of most modern democracies. However, when taking into consideration that the British constitutional monarchy is one of the most traditionalist forms of democracy, what is reflected in a particular attachment to historical procedures and institutions, one can understand the source of its ‘backwardness’ in the field of election campaign mediatisation. In fact, however, the problem with a televised debate was not limited only to a dispute between ‘traditionalists’ and ‘modernists’. As it will be shown farther on in this paper, the source of doubts and controversies was much deeper and, in its primary scope, it is universal, especially with regard to parliamentary democracies.

Nowadays, televised election debates are held in most countries. Nevertheless, it should be emphasised that it happens mainly during presidential elections, what can also be observed in the case of Poland. The most famous of them are conducted in the United States where they became the essence of political culture. Therefore, the introduction of televised debates in parliamentary democracies can be regarded as yet another manifestation of presidentialisation of these regimes¹.

The idea and organisation of debates

As it has already been stated, there is no tradition of televised debates in Britain. Thus, organising them during the election campaign of 2010 has gained the status of a historical event. Simultaneously, it is worth remembering that the first idea of a debate was born before the 1964 elections and returned recurrently before any subsequent voting. Debates were almost always suggested by the leader of the opposition and rejected by the incumbent Prime Minister. The reasons seemed obvious: the leader of the opposition as a *challenger* always had less to lose than the incumbent Prime Minister².

This time as well, the initiative to organise a debate came from the opposition Conservative Party (CP) and was supported by the leader of the Liberal Democrats (Lib-Dem). In early October 2009, Prime Minister Brown picked up the gauntlet. The terms of the debate were agreed upon in late November 2009 and formalised in a 76-point agreement³, beside which “the Treaty of Versailles looks like a hastily written shopping list”, derided the commentator of “Daily Telegraph”⁴. In fact, the agreement included such specific issues as the behaviour of the audience, the length and nature of questions and answers or the location of candidates. As far as this last aspect is concerned, *inter alia*, the fact that Gordon Brown is short-sighted in his left eye was taken into account; hence, his main rival, David Cameron was always located on the right side of the Prime Minister⁵.

The decision to hold a televised debate significantly directed the course of the entire campaign. Campaign teams of the three main parties considerably remodelled their tactics by hiring additional experts and using also the American experience. Labourites decided to

¹ R. Heffernan, P. Webb, *The British Prime Minister: Much More Than ‘First Among Equals’*, [in:] *The Presidentialization of Politics. A Comparative Study of Modern Democracies*, ed. by T. Poguntke, P. Webb, Oxford 2005, p. 27 ff.

² M. Cockerell, ‘Going live: party leaders prepare to make TV history’, “The Independent”, 12 April 2010, p. 26.

³ M. Hook, A. Hitchins, *Televising leaders or prime ministerial debates*, House of Commons Standard Note, London 2010, SN/PC/05241, pp. 3–5.

⁴ N. Tweedie, *Honest debate or stage-managed charade?*, “The Daily Telegraph” 13 April 2010, p. 20.

⁵ J. Kirkup, *Mandelson’s key role for TV debates*, “The Daily Telegraph” 12 April 2010, p. 1.

charge Peter Mandelson – spin doctor of the Labour Party (LP) in the 1990s, recognised as one of the fathers of the historical electoral success of the party in 1997 – with the preparations for the debates. On this occasion, however, voices were raised that the years spent in the government and in Brussels (where he served as the Commissioner for Trade) moved him away from the latest developments and techniques of public relations⁶.

The main role in the campaign team of Cameron was played by Andy Coulson, responsible for the image of the Conservative candidate, formerly an editor of “News of the World”⁷.

The debate caused an unusual mobilisation among the campaign team of the Liberal Democrats since it was regarded as a unique opportunity to establish an equal struggle with the Conservatives and Labourites. The whole course of the campaign was largely subordinated to the debate by building a bipolar picture of the British political scene and juxtaposing the establishment parties with the fresh Liberal Democrats, not bearing responsibility for the parlous state of British politics. John Sharkey, who previously worked for the consortium Saatchi & Saatchi and contributed to the creation of Prime Minister Thatcher’s image, was hired⁸.

The agreement, signed by the leaders of the three parties: LP, CP, and Lib-Dem, included eight parts: selection of the audience, role of the public, programme structure, role of the moderator, topics for discussion, arrangement of the debates (location of the leaders and moderator), manner of filming the audience, list of people responsible for preparing the debates on behalf of individual TV stations. Three 90-minute debates were planned, for the course of which three largest in the UK market television stations were successively responsible: the public BBC and commercial: ITV (Independent Television based on a social ownership structure) and Sky News (British Sky Broadcasting Group owned by Rupert Murdoch)⁹. Under the agreement, according to the detailed rules of the debate, among others:

- The demographic structure of the 200-strong audience had to reflect the cross-section of the British society. Its selection was entrusted to the professional agency ICM. The number of supporters of each party was to be expressed by the general ratio of 7 (CP) : 7 (LP) : 5 (Lib-Dem) and a group of supporters of smaller parties, unspecified in the agreement. The audience was allowed to ask questions that had to be addressed to all the three leaders and, at

⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 1.

⁷ M. Cockerell, *Going live...*, p. 26.

⁸ D. Macintyre, *Clegg’s Journey to the Promised Land*, “The Independent” 3 May 2010, p. 6.

⁹ See B. McNair, *News and Journalism in the UK*, London 2009, pp. 114–126.

least a half of them, refer to the main theme of the debate. Additionally, the moderator presented the agreed number of questions asked by emails.

- Each of the three debates was split into the ‘question’ part and ‘free’ debate. The debate was led by a moderator appointed by one of the three television stations. At the beginning of the programme, leaders were allowed to make a general opening statement relating to the subject of the debate and at the end – a closing statement relating to the course of the debate. In the ‘question’ period, leaders referred to the issues raised by the audience. During the ‘free’ part, they exchanged views.

- Each of the debates had a leading theme. The first one covered internal affairs (i.e.: health care, education, immigration, law and security, constitutional issues, reforms). The second – international affairs (i.e.: situation in Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran and the Middle East; national defence; European integration; terrorism; climate change). The third – economic issues (i.e.: financing the public sector, taxation, public debt, deficit, recession, banking system, pensions, labour market).

- Close-up cutaways of individual audience members were allowed only at the moment of asking questions and when the leader directly addressed the person asking the question. Such shots were expressly prohibited when the leaders responded to questions or held a discussion¹⁰.

Controversies surrounding debates: for and against

The already mentioned ambivalent attitude of the British to televised election debates stems from both the belief about the specificity of the political system of the United Kingdom as well as universal dilemmas associated with the excessive mediatisation of politics. Main controversies surrounding debates may be encapsulated in four points, presenting arguments of both their opponents and supporters.

Debates are at odds with the logic of the British political system

- Against: Debate critics challenged the legitimacy of debates, claiming even that they are unconstitutional. They regarded them as ‘presidential’ and, therefore, inappropriate in a parliamentary democracy, highlighting the fact that the UK electorate votes for parties rather than leaders.

- For: Debate proponents, rejecting constitutional arguments, quoted the example of Australia whose political system is similar to the British one and, yet, since 1984, debates have been a

¹⁰ *Prime Ministerial Debates – Programme Format – agreed by all parties 1st March 2010*, [in:] M. Hook, A. Hitchins, *Televising leaders...*, pp. 14–19.

permanent element of the national electoral landscape¹¹. Moreover, it was pointed out that they became commonplace also in Britain – regardless of the fact that there had not been any single great election debate before. During earlier election campaigns, television stations broadcast individual, often extensive, interviews with leaders of political parties¹², whose crucial, and frequently main, element was a polemic with the views of political opponents. In practice, therefore, together they constituted one, though spread over time, television debate.

The proper place for debates of leaders is the parliament

■ Against: Prime Minister Gordon Brown stated (what was read as an attempt to withdraw from the prior agreement) that the TV debate is redundant since it regularly takes place in the parliament. Debates in the House of Commons broadcast on television are thereby a sufficient and natural forum for the exchange of views between party leaders.

■ For: David Cameron – in response to Prime Minister Brown’s doubts – indicated that there are no parliamentary debates during the election campaign. Furthermore, their specificity lies in the fact that they are dedicated to specific, current issues or legislation. Thus, they do not provide the possibility of confrontation between the leaders’ approaches to general, basic policy issues¹³.

TV debates lead to the excessive mediatisation of politics

■ Against: Within the framework of this process, it is the media, not politicians, that act as gatekeepers, deciding not only about the form but also about the content of the debate. Representation and responsibility (accountability) of the authorities are considered to be the basic elements of the political system of Great Britain¹⁴. The media not only are not subject to these rules, but also, in their own way, are their denial. Generally, there are no mechanisms to not only legitimise the growing power of the media, but also effectively control their actions and the propagated messages. The famous and repeatedly reprinted analysis of the British media market, entitled *Power without Responsibility* written by James Curran and Jean

¹¹ *Ibidem*, pp. 5–6; M. Cockerell, *Going live...*, p. 26.

¹² See, for instance P. Bull, *Equivocation and the Rhetoric of Modernization. An Analysis of Televised Interviews with Tony Blair in the 1997 British General Election*, “Journal of Language and Social Psychology” Vol. 19 (2000), No. 2, p. 223 ff.

¹³ M. Hook, A. Hitchens, *Televising leaders...*, p. 18.

¹⁴ D. Marsh, M. Hall, *The British Political Tradition: Explaining the Fate of New Labour’s Constitutional Reform Agenda*, “British Politics” 2007, No. 2, p. 220.

Seaton, presents the dilemmas of the increasing importance of the media in the political system without developing adequate mechanisms of social control over them¹⁵.

■ For: Mediatisation of politics is an objective, general and universal phenomenon. TV election debate, however, is an example of a successful symbiosis between the two spheres, in which social control is secured and economic goals of the media (viewership) are included in social and political aims of politics (presentation of positions, objective assessment of candidates) in a harmonious manner. This provides a system of strict rules that govern both television stations organising a debate and the participating politicians as well as the audience.

The formal aspect of televised debates rather than their merits is assessed

■ Against: The style of televised debates leads to the trivialisation of opinions of their participants whom the audience judges also (some claim that first of all) by their appearance, dress, gestures, attractive statements and not by the reference to the essence of political issues and problems¹⁶.

■ For: The TV debate, due to the rules determining its course, is far more substantive than the exchange of views during a vigorously developing election campaign. The analysis of British election campaigns clearly proves that they evolve in the direction of unilateral domination of electoral spots – increasingly more Americanised, using PR techniques calculated in the first place to discredit the opponent. Admittedly, the organisation of the debates could not change this trend; it could however introduce a correction element based on ‘civilised’ forms of exchange of arguments, giving each party the chance to refer to the allegations and opinions of the opponents¹⁷.

The course of debates

Significant controversies arose already in the phase of setting up the list of discussion participants. Almost always, only the leaders of the two major parties (CP, LP) were taken into account in the proposals which appeared during previous elections, recognising thereby that only they aspire to the office of Prime Minister in the UK (discussions were called ‘prime ministerial’ debates). Inviting a representative of the third party – Lib-Dem – was questioned for two reasons. Firstly, it strengthened the impression that there existed three equal partners in the situation when the status of the Lib-Dem in the British party system was clearly inferior to the two main parties, which alternately took the official role of: the ruling party or Her

¹⁵ J. Curran, J. Seaton, *Power without Responsibility. The press and broadcasting in Britain*, 4th ed., London 1993.

¹⁶ M. Hook, A. Hitchins, *Televising leaders...*, pp. 5–6.

¹⁷ R. Hodess, J.C. Tedesco, L. Lee Kaid, *British Party Election Broadcast. A Comparison of 1992 and 1997*, “The International Journal of Press/Politics” Vol. 5 (2000), No. 4, p. 59.

Majesty's Opposition¹⁸. In addition, inviting Nick Clegg to the debate resulted in the fact that leaders of other, smaller parties laid claims as well: the Scottish National Party (SNP), Welsh Plaid Cymru (called also the Party of Wales) and even the radical United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) and the fascistic British National Party (BNP). Finally, separate debates were held in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland and attended by the party leaders present at regional political scenes.

Debates enjoyed a large audience, estimated at about 10 million viewers. In the survey carried out before the first debate, respondents predicted that Cameron would come out on top (44 per cent), followed by Brown (20 per cent) while the chances for Clegg looked bad (14 per cent). Simultaneously, the hopes of voters of individual parties were interestingly depicted. Whereas as many as 80 per cent of the Conservative voters believed in Cameron's good performance, merely a half of the Labour electorate in relation to Brown and only 39 per cent of the Lib-Dem supporters believed in Clegg¹⁹. Experts, however, assessed the chances of leaders differently. It was a common belief that the leader of the Lib-Dem, Nick Clegg had the most to gain (because the least to lose). From the other two, greater chances were given to Cameron due to both his better appearance and the possibility of taking advantage of being in the opposition to the incumbent Prime Minister, who was responsible not only for the then current state of affairs in the country, but also for the whole 13 years of the Labour government²⁰.

Despite the detailed description of the guiding theme of each debate, their course was slightly different from the outlined scenario. The first one, which was to be devoted to domestic affairs, was dominated by the issue of recession and necessary budget cuts as well as the tax increase expected after the elections. The second debate – although foreign policy (including European integration) was supposed to be the prevailing theme – was also dominated by domestic politics (corruption scandals, pension system, potential coalition)²¹. In the third one, which was to focus on economic issues, significant attention was paid to the immigration problems. In total, all debates were dominated by economic matters, particularly issues of the budget deficit, finding the guilty for the crisis and seeking ways out of it.

¹⁸ N. Johnson, *Opposition in the British Political System*, "Government and Opposition" Vol. 32 (1997), No. 4, pp. 448–449; M. Durkin, O. Gay, *The Other Opposition Parties At Westminster*, House of Commons Standard Note, London 2010, SN/PC/4120, p. 2.

¹⁹ J. Curtice, *One telling blow in the TV studio and Cameron is home and dry*, "The Daily Telegraph" 11 April 2010, p. 4.

²⁰ *Debating chamber*, "The Daily Telegraph" 12 April 2010, p. 6.

²¹ N. Morris, M. Savage, *Clegg basks in the sun*, "The Independent" 17 April 2010, p. 7; R. Winnett, A. Porter, *Cameron on the Money*, "The Daily Telegraph" 30 April 2010, p. 1.

This implied interactions between the three participants. In the first two debates, using his position as a challenger and referring to anti-establishment slogans (criticism of the ‘old politics’ dominated by the LP and CP), Nick Clegg gained ‘points’. In the third one, the weight of the discussion concentrated on bilateral exchanges of views between the leaders of the Conservatives and Labourites, in the course of which Cameron managed to present his party as the only viable alternative to the inept Labour Party government. In such arrangement, Clegg’s position was marginalised in the third debate.

The debate confirmed the earlier speculations of experts. In the opinion of the media, the Lib-Dem leader came out on top in the first debate. The results of the second one were not as clear although the predominant opinion was that Clegg “gave the best impression”, but Cameron was best prepared for the discussion²². The third debate, dominated by two issues: the economy and immigration, was the most successful for Cameron. Clegg and Brown were rated much worse²³. Public opinion polls revealed identical opinions (Table 1).

Table 1. Social assessment of the debate
(victory assigned to individual leaders in percentages)

Party leader	After the 1st debate	After the 2nd debate	After the 3rd debate
David Cameron (CP)	20	30	35
Gordon Brown (LP)	19	30	26
Nick Clegg (Lib-Dem)	51	33	33

Source: J. Glover, *A new contender for top job emerges after TV debate success, say viewers*, “The Guardian” International Edition 17 April 2010, p. 13; P. Wintour, P. Curtis, *Clegg survives the storm*, “The Guardian” International Edition 23 April 2010, p. 1; R. Winnett, A. Porter, *Cameron on the Money*, “The Daily Telegraph” 30 April 2010, p. 1.

Consequences of the debate

The direct impact of the debates on political sympathies appeared to be limited although as many as 19 per cent of voters stated that they changed their political sympathies under the influence of the disputes²⁴. In spite of the fact that this survey was conducted a few days before the elections, results suggest that, going to the polls, voters were not willing to make decisions under the influence of the impression that they had about the debates.

²² J. Kirkut, R. Prince, *EU treaty cheated you all, Cameron tells the voters*, “The Daily Telegraph” 23 April 2010, p. 23.

²³ R. Winnett, A. Porter, *Cameron on the Money...*, p. 1.

²⁴ *IOS Poll*, “The Independent on Sunday” 2 May 2010, p. 4.

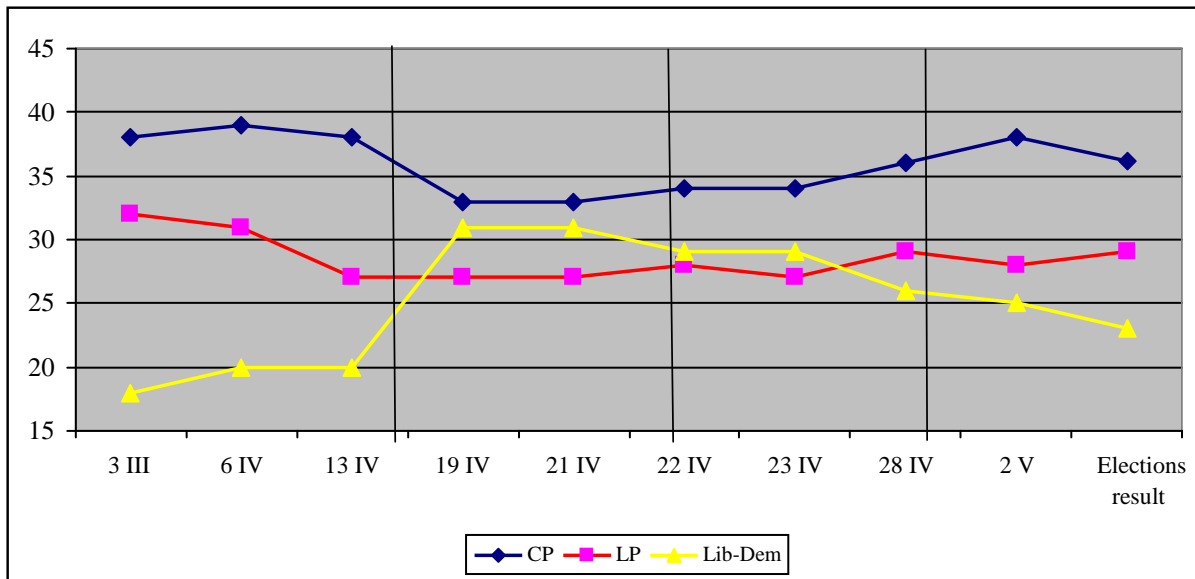


Chart 1. Debates (vertical lines) and support for the LP, CP and Lib-Dem (in percentages)

Source: “The Daily Telegraph” 26 April 2010, p. 4, 2 May 2010, p. 2.

It seems that owing to the debates, the belief that a multiparty system functions in their country instilled in the consciousness of the British for good²⁵. The consent for Nick Clegg’s participation in the debates as an equal partner made him a politician of the first format who gained at least a nominal chance of taking the office of Prime Minister. Clegg took advantage of this opportunity. His statements during the debates often began with the following words: “If we win the elections...”, “If I become the Prime Minister...”. It should therefore be assumed that the debates contributed significantly to reducing the existing gap between the third party and the CP and LP.

Studies conducted after the first debate located the Lib-Dem in the second place behind the Conservatives with the result (depending on the agency) of 29–31 per cent. Only surveys, published 3–4 days after the second debate, recorded a fall of the Lib-Dem to the third place with a simultaneous increase of the Conservatives (by 3 per cent) and a slight increase in the support for the Labourites (by 1 per cent). Still – as shown by the survey of 27

²⁵ Political scientists believe that, in fact, this situation occurred in the mid 1970s, since when the Liberal Party (currently the Liberal Democrats) has systematically achieved double-digit support (since the 1980s, it has even been the twenty percent range), see D. Denver, *The SDP-Liberal Alliance: The End of the Two-Party System?*, [in:] *Change in British Politics*, ed. by H. Berrington, F. Cass, London 1984, p. 77; P. Dunleavy, H. Margetts, *From Majoritarian to Pluralist Democracy? Electoral Reform in Britain since 1997*, “Journal of Theoretical Politics” Vol. 13 (2001), No. 3, p. 296; P. Mair, *In the Aggregate: Mass Electoral Behavior in Western Europe, 1950–2000*, [in:] *Comparative Democratic Politics. A Guide to Contemporary Theory and Research*, ed. by H. Keman, London 2002, p. 124.

April, i.e. two days before the third debate – the Lib-Dem could count on about 80 seats in the House of Commons, which was 17 more than in the 2005 elections and, at the same time, the number of seats was the highest since the 1923 elections²⁶. Deepening of the downward trend that appeared after the third debate turned out to be the most painful. It could be related to Clegg’s liberal position on immigration issues – disclosed in the course of the third debate – differing considerably from the public opinion’s attitude to this matter²⁷.

Some analysts downplayed the importance of the debates themselves, indicating that they could have had at most a short-term impact on social sympathies. In the long run, after – as the commentator of *The Daily Telegraph* put it – *voters thought twice*, other determinants and arguments came to light²⁸. Analysts pointed out that, while Clegg – in a holistic sense – was the winner of the televised debates, the closer to the election day, the more the voters realised the difference between a good performance and governing the state well. Concerns about possible complications with the emergence of government under a hung parliament (52 per cent of respondents considered that this situation would be unfavourable to Britain) did not help either Clegg or the Liberal Democrats. Cameron took advantage of this fact emphasising: “We need strong, decisive leadership in these uncertain times and that’s what the Conservatives offer”²⁹.

Research has proved that the crisis sharpened especially two issues relating to the above claim. Firstly, it reinforced the conviction among the British that in such a deplorable situation in which the state budget was, strong government was necessary after the elections and coalition disputes could substantially weaken its decision-making capacity. Secondly, three out of four Britons highlighted the importance of immigration issues, especially in terms of the expected job cuts in the public sector³⁰.

Another important consequence of televised debates was the increasing tendency to personify British politics. The fate of political parties had never before depended to such an extent on a ‘good performance’ of their leaders. Analysts agree that the success or failure was determined not so much by substantive matters as by the image. Even before the debates, it was suggested that the winner would not be the one who was best prepared, but who made the best impression. Public relations specialists even pointed out that too diligent substantive

²⁶ J. Glover, *Lib Dems set for most MPs Since 1923 – poll*, “The Guardian” 29 April 2010, p. 1.

²⁷ N. Morris, B. Kenber, *Clegg scents Labour blood in battle for second*, “The Independent” 1 May 2010, p. 11.

²⁸ P. Hennessy, *Poll blow for Clegg as voters think twice*, “The Daily Telegraph” 2 May 2010, p. 1.

²⁹ J. Curtice, *Handful of votes will decide results*, “The Daily Telegraph” 2 May 2010, p. 2.

³⁰ P. Hennessy, *Poll blow for Clegg...*, p. 1.

preparation of the candidate might turn against him/her, restricting his/her flexibility and the ability to present oratorical and discursive talents.

Supporters of various parties were asked to what extent their political sympathies were affected by the fact that Cameron was the leader of the CP, Brown – LP and Clegg – Lib-Dem. The greatest impact of the ‘leadership factor’ was found in the case of the Lib-Dem, the smallest – the Labourites (Chart 2).

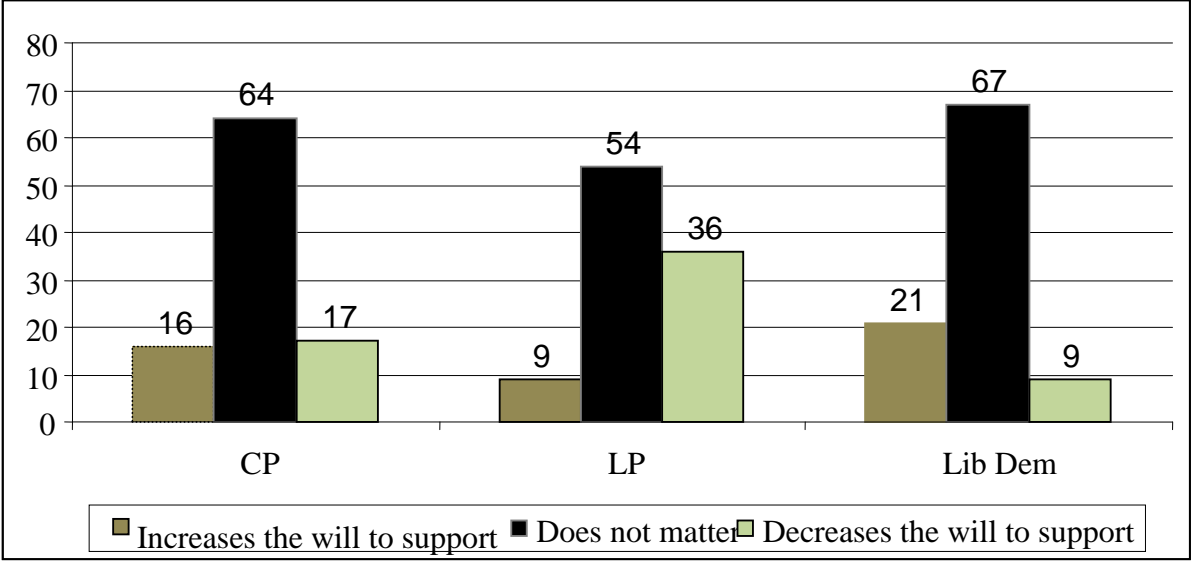


Chart 2. Party leader as a factor increasing / decreasing the will to vote for particular parties (percentage of replies of given party supporters)

Source: “The Guardian” 29 April 2010, p. 19.

Therefore, the opinion expressed in the editorial comment of “The Independent” that the debate itself through its smoothing (conditioned largely by the adoption of stringent rules) was detached from the real life is not entirely without reason. Hence, the actual campaign, though shortened, began after the debates were over³¹. In fact, also the course of the debates impels us to ask the question about the veracity of the political world that they create. Undoubtedly, they introduced peace to the election campaign, exerting an influence on civilising its course. Yet, were they not an isolated image of real politics? A sterile television studio, from which any spontaneity was eliminated, should have helped focus on factual aspects of the debate. The rigours of time (e.g. one-minute responses) changed the debate into

³¹ *Election 2010. The Campaign*, “The Independent on Sunday” 2 May 2010, p. 51.

a contest of striking statements, apt replies and candidates' appearance. Party leaders, at an unprecedented level, became the 'faces' of their parties and even more – their embodiment.

The debates both deepened the tendency to personalise and even 'celebritise' politics as well as were their consequences. As a matter of fact, analysts note that the contemporary political scene increasingly becomes subject to similar criteria of media presentation as the world of show business³².

In the pursuit of an ideal image created by public relations professionals, candidates of the main parties became hostages of certain schemas. It resulted principally in the fact that they, or more precisely – their images, imitated one another. Each of the three analysed leaders made every effort to present himself as a 'bloke next door' (an ordinary citizen), what was confronted with delight by the media with their upper-class background and elite education. Similarly, all candidates were presented as heads of model families; however, it was obvious also in this case that it is not about an 'average family', but about a more idealised image of the television series 'average family'³³. The wives of candidates were exposed to the public to the extent unobserved in earlier campaigns. This 'ranking' was won by Sarah Brown, a former PR specialist. Samantha Cameron, briefly called SamCam by the tabloids, was catching up with her. The campaign team of the Conservative Party presented her as an exemplary mother and housewife in the clips on YouTube³⁴. Nick Clegg's wife, Miriam González Duártez was depicted in a less favourable light not only because she was 'the least British' (born into a Spanish senatorial family), but also because she strongly rejected the role of the 'wife of her husband'³⁵.

The debates were accompanied by the battle of gestures, dress and behaviour. Regarded as leftist (although sympathising more with the Lib-Dem during the campaign), "The Guardian" regularly published the 'ranking of style'. It drew attention to things essentially secondary, though influencing the overall reception of candidates, such as the choice of neckties, suits, haircuts. The newspaper stylists rated Clegg the highest in this ranking³⁶.

Reputable demoscopic agencies (Metro/Harris, MORI) expanded their research field to assess the attractiveness of candidates. This opinion also proved to be the most favourable

³² See J. Street, *The Celebrity Politician: Political Style and Popular Culture*, [in:] *Media and the Restyling of Politics. Consumerism, Celebrity and Cynicism*, ed. by J. Corner, D. Pels, London 2003, p. 92 ff.

³³ Ch. Patterson, *Not everyone can play happy family like Dave, Gordon and Nick*, "The Independent" 1 May 2010, p. 27.

³⁴ T. Gold, *What good is a party without inviting the girls?*, "The Daily Telegraph" 11 April 2010, p. 9.

³⁵ B. Brogan, *Are we ready for first-lady politics?*, "The Daily Telegraph" 10 April 2010, p. 17.

³⁶ I. Fox, *Clegg's Sunday best*, "The Guardian, International Edition" 3 May 2010, p. 13.

for Clegg. According to the survey of early May 2010, he enjoyed the greatest popularity among women assessing the attractiveness of candidates. By playing this card, Clegg highlighted, among others, the fact that he was supported by a well-known actor, the main protagonist in *Pride and Prejudice*, Colin Firth. His campaign team, arranging joint photo sessions, referred to the physical resemblance between Clegg and Firth³⁷.

Conclusions – TV debates as a manifestation of the increasing political role of the media

Mediatisation of politics, observed in modern democracies, is not limited only to displaying image-related strengths and weaknesses of politicians. The growing importance of the media in politics as such seems to be more essential here. For several decades, they have been taking on the role of political parties as an intermediary between the elites and the public³⁸. Furthermore, it seemed that the observed decline in the role of political parties as moderators of political discourse in Britain would be compensated by the traditionally strong influence of civic institutions (clubs, associations, ginger groups, think tanks). Unfortunately, we are observing the contrary trend – their political activity decreases³⁹. Thereby, they not only compensate for the widening power of the media to a lesser extent, but do the opposite – expose new fields in which this power may be revealed. Maintaining a relatively high level of commitment of non-institutionalised forms of participation in politics is not able to slow this process down. In an interview carried out by “The Daily Telegraph” in April 2010, David Cameron confessed: “The last four years seem to be one great job interview. Since I aspire to lead the country, people have the right to know more about me. It would be naïve not to accept this in the era of YouTube and Twitter. Some voters may not like such an approach, but everything that is personal becomes [also nowadays] political: an experience that shapes my life, my ideas and my ideals”⁴⁰.

The dilemma appearing here can be reduced to the question whether the observed changes are – as suggested by Cameron – of a quantitative or rather qualitative nature. In other words, is the real position of the media confined only to ensure specific logistics of the social discourse, or whether they begin to play the role of a ‘director’ of political events? The truth seems to lie somewhere in between. The media, especially television, play the role of a

³⁷ C. Radford, *Looking like Mr Darcy will always get the ladies' vote*, “The Daily Telegraph” 4 May 2010, p. 7.

³⁸ T. Bale, *European Politics: A Comparative Introduction*, Houndmills 2008, pp. 213–217.

³⁹ See B. Crick, *The Decline of Political Thinking in British Public Life*, “Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy” Vol. 1 (1998), No. 1, p. 112.

⁴⁰ D. Cameron, *My vision, your choice*, “The Daily Telegraph” 3 April 2010, p. 25.

moderator who sets the tone for the debate, significantly affecting its subject, course and outcome. Manuel Castells has introduced the category of *networked power* which generally means imposing “an actor’s will over another actor’s will”⁴¹. Analysing the first televised election debates in the UK, exactly the aforementioned power of the media can be confirmed. The conditions under which the debate was conducted were almost ‘sterile’ – it was assured that none of the outsiders, including journalists, had any effect on its course or outcome. Nonetheless, if we look holistically at the debates, we will discover that their content-related dimension was pushed into the background at the expense of a specific – let us refer to the name used by political scientists from the University of Silesia – *war of impressions*⁴². When, before the 1964 elections, Harold Wilson, the Labour leader of the opposition, threw down the gauntlet to the incumbent Prime Minister, Alec Douglas-Home, offering him a TV debate, the latter – rejecting the challenge – said: “I’m not particularly attracted by confrontations of personality. If we aren’t careful, you’ll get a sort of Top of the Pops contest. [Consequently,] you’ll then get the best actor as leader of the country and the actor will be prompted by a scriptwriter”⁴³. Therefore, even then the role of television was perceived not only as a channel of communication, but rather as a creator of the new reality.

The *faux pas* made by Prime Minister Brown was a drastic example of the media power in the period of the 2010 campaign. While visiting Rochdale near Manchester, the Prime Minister accidentally stumbled upon a 65-year-old widow, Gillian Duffy (a Labour supporter), who asked him about the deficit, education matters and immigration policy of the Labour Party. Leaving the place and not realising that he still had the microphone pinned to his lapel, Brown allowed himself for an unsophisticated comment about Duffy, calling her a ‘bigot’. The media publicised this blunder disproportionately to the gravity of the situation, forcing Prime Minister Brown to apologise repeatedly, what *de facto* dominated the last days of his campaign⁴⁴. He himself also admitted that the political price for the ‘bigot’ gaffe proved to be extremely high⁴⁵. In the survey commissioned by “The Independent” four days before the elections, as many as 11 per cent of the Labour voters said that the Prime Minister’s *faux pas* contributed to the change of their political sympathies⁴⁶.

⁴¹ M. Castells, *Communication Power*, Oxford 2009, p. 44.

⁴² M. Kolczyński, M. Mazur, *Wojna na wrażenia. Strategie polityczne i telewizja w kampaniach wyborczych 2005 r. w Polsce*, Warszawa 2007.

⁴³ M. Cockerell, *Going live...*, p. 26.

⁴⁴ A. Porter, R. Prince, *Day of disaster*, “The Daily Telegraph” 29 April 2010, pp. 1–2; N. Morris, *It was day like any other campaign day. Then Mrs Duffy took the stage*, “The Independent” 29 April 2010, p. 2.

⁴⁵ A. Porter, M. Riddell, *I’ve paid a very high price*, “The Daily Telegraph” 1 May 2010, p. 1.

⁴⁶ *IOS Poll*, “The Independent on Sunday” 2 May 2010, p. 4.

Ideas – as Castells wrote – are only images (either visual or not) in our mind, created during the communication process. The role of the modern media as a primary means of communication is becoming increasingly vital also for creating these images. Thus, leaders who do not exist in the media do not exist in the public consciousness as well⁴⁷. Not demonising the impact of the media on contemporary politics, it should be claimed that their growing role is determined not by some concealed objectives, but rather by the very logic of communication, creation and reception of the image.

The televised debates highlighted the increasing influence of the leader's image as a factor conditioning the public perception of the party. However, the role of the media, stemming principally from dynamic changes occurring within the contemporary political communication, goes far beyond these aspects. Researchers of modern political parties suggest that “the mass media have opened up new channels of direct access of citizens to political leaders, without the need of using traditional electoral channels”⁴⁸. To put it differently, these traditional channels signify expanded party organisations which are becoming less and less necessary in the communication between leaders and party elites with the society.

The fact that televised debates would be deprived of the nature of a discussion forum if they were limited only to television should be emphasised in the margin of these considerations. Already during the Nixon-Kennedy debate, it was noted that if the impact of television alone was assessed, then it would have a different effect than in connection with the ‘network’ effects of all media. In this case, those voters who based their assessment merely on the television transmission rated Kennedy's performance higher while those who built their evaluation on the radio transmission appreciated Nixon more. Therefore, confronting the debate with other media's transmissions and opinions co-decides about the success of the television debate. The subsequent US presidential debate, which was held in 1976 between Gerald Ford and Jimmy Carter, is an interesting example here as well. During the debate, Ford made a *lapsus*, arguing that the Soviet Union in no way affected the fate of Central and Eastern European states. This blunder passed unnoticed in the course of the debate, but was publicised in the following few days, mostly by the press⁴⁹.

⁴⁷ M. Castells, *Communication Power...*, pp. 193–194.

⁴⁸ J.R. Montero, R. Gunther, *Introduction: Reviewing and Reassessing Parties*, [in:] *Democracy, Intermediation and Voting on Four Continents*, ed. by R. Gunther, J.R. Montero, H.-J. Puhle, Oxford 2007, p. 5.

⁴⁹ R. Chakrabarti, *TV election debates around the world*, www.news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/politics/8586835.stm [accessed: 1 February 2011].

The situation was similar in the case of the 2010 debates on British television. The influence of the media was multidimensional mainly due to the fact that they did not confine themselves solely to television broadcasting. Subsequently, in analytical television programmes, the press and, finally, on the Internet, the entire course of the debate, importance of the comments made by participants, opinions of voters and potential consequences for voters were subjected to a detailed analysis. In this manner, the debate ‘spilled’ over the whole country; other politicians, journalists, experts, citizens were drawn into it⁵⁰, what significantly verified its ‘image’ importance and, for instance, probably contributed to the decrease in support for the Lib-Dem.

A significant role of the Internet during the 2010 election debates should also be highlighted here. As the data referring to the US presidential elections, adduced by Castells (Chart 3) show, the Internet is the fastest growing medium of political communication. The same trend is also discernible in British politics. Even though there are no comprehensive data, if we compare the respective figures of the 2001 elections, during which 7 per cent of respondents indicated the Internet as the main source of information about the political campaign, it is clear that this is more than in the US presidential elections in 2000 (4 per cent), and even in 2004 (6 per cent)⁵¹.

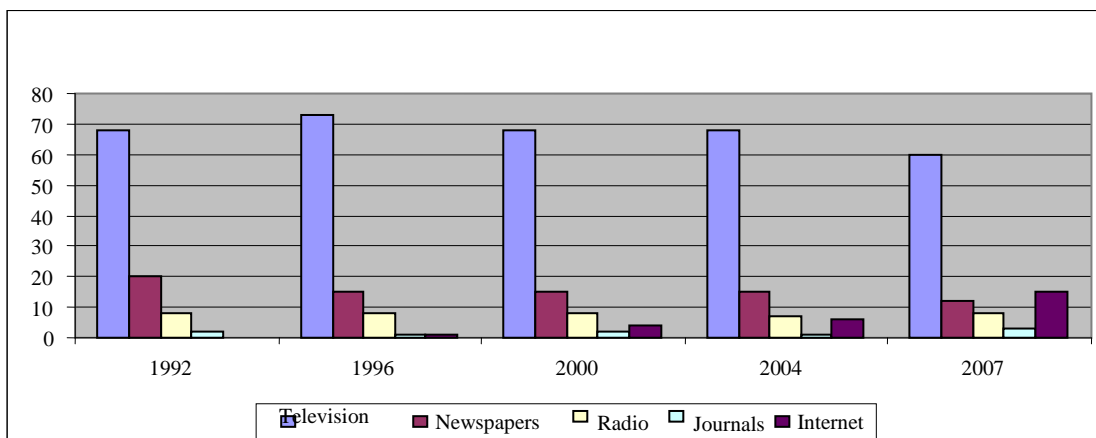


Chart 3. Main sources of information about the election campaign in the USA between 1992 and 2007

Source: M. Castells, *Communication Power*, Oxford 2009, p. 231.

⁵⁰ Cf. D. Holmes, *Communication Theory. Media, Technology, Society*, London 2005, p. 101 ff.

⁵¹ N. Anstead, A. Chadwick, *Parties, election campaigning, and the internet. Toward a comparative institutional approach*, [in:] *Routledge Handbook of Internet Politics*, ed. by A. Chadwick, P.N. Howard, London 2009, p. 61.

The increasing position of the Internet is visible in both the secondary and primary dimension. The first aspect revealed itself expressively, among others, in the fact that most of the newspapers, television and radio stations not only reported widely on the preparation and conduct of the debates but, simultaneously, also significantly expanded interactive websites where vigorous discussions about them were held⁵². However, saying that the Internet is of a secondary nature to the traditional media would be untrue. The 2010 campaign and televised debates only confirmed the fact that the Internet acts according to its own rules⁵³. Even if the debate is originally created in the ‘traditional media’, on the Internet, it takes on its own logic, characterised by the spontaneity of discussion – on the one hand, it means enlargement of the overall base of participants / audience; on the other, their narrowing in the socio-demographic dimension⁵⁴.

⁵² *Debate 2010 online*, “The Daily Telegraph” 11 April 2010, p. 9.

⁵³ S. Ward, R. Gibson, *European political organizations and the internet: mobilization, participation, and change*, [in:] *Routledge Handbook...*, p. 26.

⁵⁴ The research of 2001 showed that, while the use of the Internet in the age group 18–34 was at the level of 54.5 per cent, it was only 22 per cent for the group 55–64: J. Gardner, A. Oswald, *Internet use: the digital divide*, [in:] *British Social Attitudes. The 18th Report*, ed. by A. Park *et al.*, London 2001, p. 163.