



*Dear Simon,*

*What form do television debates between party leaders take in the UK, and how influential are they with regard to the election outcome?*

Unlike many other countries, the UK has not had much of a history of TV debates between party leaders: indeed, the set of three debates between Labour, Tories and Liberal Democrats in 2010 were the first of their kind. As a result, there tends to be more debate about having debates than actual debates!

This time, a long set of discussions between parties and TV stations come to very little agreement. Smaller parties insisted on taking part (like in the French presidential elections, this is a great opportunity for them to make themselves known), while the Tories and Labour (considering themselves the most likely lead party in any future government) wanted to retain a specific debate among them, and the TV companies tried to find something that would be presentable to viewers. The result was just one debate with all seven party leaders, held in early April.

Partly because of the difficulties in organising it in the first place, and partly because of the format, the impact of that debate has been very small, expect to prompt some English voters to wonder whether they could vote for the Scottish or Welsh nationalist parties.

With very active campaign strategies for all the parties, the debates have become just one hurdle among others to be jumped in a long political race.

This might change, however. A second debate a few days ago, which Cameron preferred not to take part in, wanting to position himself “above the fray”, allowed all the others to criticise him without any contradiction. In short: while it’s far from certain that participating in a TV debate brings anything in terms of votes, not participating may be costly.

Talk soon,

*Simon*

