



## Why the Lib Dems do well out of TV debates

The leaders' debates have prompted voters to re-examine their old party identities in light of their policy preferences

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guardian.co.uk, Thursday 29 April 2010 13.48 BST

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The format of live face-to-face debates between the political leaders has led to a more deliberative approach by voters. Photograph: PA Wire/PA

How to account for the sudden surge of the Liberal Democrats? For some, it is a tribute to Nick Clegg; for others, a sign of David Cameron's failure to take advantage of Brown-fatigue. But we have a different explanation. Existing commitments to the two major parties have been fragile for a long time. The television debates have precipitated a national conversation that encouraged many voters to re-examine their old party identities in light of their policy preferences. Deliberation makes a difference.

This is suggested by the results of a "deliberative poll" conducted in the late 1990s in collaboration

with the National Centre for Social Research. A microcosm of the electorate, a scientific sample of 275 voters, was gathered for a weekend to discuss the issues raised by the election campaign of 1997. Britain was then at a different point in its political cycle: Blair's Labour were on the rise, while the Conservatives were exhausted. The Lib Dems, as usual, were also-rans.

Or so it seemed. But the deliberative poll permitted a deeper investigation. It gathered together a representative sample of the British people in the Granada Television studio in Manchester for a whole weekend's discussion raised by the election campaign. Deliberations focused on economic issues and culminated in a two-hour broadcast. Participants deliberated in small groups and questioned spokesmen for the three parties: Gordon Brown for Labour, Kenneth Clarke for the Conservatives and Malcolm Bruce for the Lib Dems.

Our question: Did the give-and-take make a difference, and if so, how much? The participants were polled before and after their weekend of discussion and debate. The results were striking. Before the deliberative poll, the results tracked ordinary expectations: Labour's share of the representative sample was 52%; the Tories 29%; and the Lib Dems 13%. But after participants engaged in the sustained consideration of all three parties and their positions, the score was: Labour down eight to 44%; Tories down eight to 21%, and the Lib Dems up 20 to 33%.

This is the same basic pattern that prevails today – only now the exhausted Labour party lags behind the refreshed Conservatives. But once again, both parties have lost ground to the Lib Dems, who have arrived at the same 33% share they obtained in 1997.

These findings make a compelling case for a fundamental change in the British constitution. Perhaps the present British system of single-district representation might be defended if Clegg's remarkable surge were a one-off event. But if the debates revealed the structure of British opinion, once the people discuss the party positions on the issues, then a voting system that better translates votes into seats becomes an imperative. No democracy worthy of the name can afford to misrepresent the enduring commitments of one-third of the electorate.

In the likely event of a hung parliament, the protagonists shouldn't view electoral reform as an option, but as a democratic imperative.

The same is true when it comes to redefining the constitutional role of public deliberation. The current three-debate format only came about by accident. Prime ministers generally don't like television debates, since they dominate the airwaves in any event; Gordon Brown only agreed in a desperate effort to regain momentum. But future debates should not depend on the strategic interests of the political protagonists. The Lib Dems should insist that they become a part of the constitutional bargain reached by the new parliament. A series of debates should be required by statute in future elections. If a major party refuses to participate, its decision should be represented by an empty podium in the assembly.

But this is only a start. When all is said and done, the traditional television debate is a top-down process where only leaders talk and voters passively observe. In our work, we have built on the experience with deliberative polling to urge the development of new participatory forms through which the general public can engage more actively in defining and discussing the leading issues of the campaign.

But for now, it is enough for Britain to require televised debates and take the lead in fashioning a more deliberative democracy for the 21st century.

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