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4. Leaders' Debate Coordinators

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Leaders' Debate Coordinators

Brooks DeCillia and Michel Cormier

Leaders' debates offer Canadians a singular and valuable moment to evaluate the politicians hoping to lead our country. They are an unfiltered democratic exercise in which voters can compare leaders and their ideas side by side in real time. A healthy democracy requires healthy public debate. However, Canada's political parties and media organizations constantly wrangle about the terms of the leaders' debates, resulting in a debate about debates. The federal Leaders' Debate Commission was set up in response to those concerns. This chapter describes – and evaluates – Canada's first official debate commission.

Les débats des chefs offrent aux Canadiens un moment unique et précieux pour évaluer les politiciens qui espèrent de diriger notre pays. Il s'agit d'un exercice démocratique sans filtre où les électeurs peuvent comparer les dirigeants et leurs idées en temps réel. Une démocratie en santé nécessite un débat public sain. Cependant, les partis politiques et les médias canadiens se querellent constamment sur les termes des débats des chefs, ce qui occasionne un débat sur les débats. La Commission fédérale des débats des chefs a été créée afin de répondre à ces préoccupations. Ce chapitre décrit et évalue le travail de cette première commission canadienne officielle des débats des chefs.

IN A FRAGMENTED media environment, singular national “media events” have become increasingly elusive.¹ It usually takes a major sports event to capture the collective mediated attention of millions of Canadians at the same time. A staggering 16.6 million Canadians, for instance, watched the Olympic gold medal men’s hockey game in Vancouver in 2010. Historically, the federal leaders’ debates have risen to the level of a national media event and did so in the 2019 campaign when, for the first time, the Leaders’ Debate Commission played a coordinating role.²

Canadians were first introduced to televised federal leaders’ debates, beamed across the country from Parliament’s Confederation Hall, in 1968. The studio lights dimmed for a few elections until they powered up again in 1979. The TV studio was empty again during the 1980 campaign because the parties and broadcasters could not agree to terms. From 1984 to 2011, federal leaders participated in televised debates organized and produced by a consortium of broadcasters. The consortium – CTV, TVA, Global, and CBC/Radio-Canada – negotiated privately with the political parties to determine the format, topics, and which politicians participated. Political strategists persistently call leaders’ debates critical moments in election campaigns; political scientists are not so sure, stressing that the evidence is mixed when it comes to changing votes. These dramatic media spectacles – sometimes with knockout punches and gotcha moments – have affected how many Canadians vote.³ Of note, however, party leaders have won debates and still lost elections.⁴

Far from the traditional face-off among three party leaders in the 1980s, the event has been altered in tangible ways in the 2000s by technology and changing politics. Among the changes are the increase of parties represented in the House of Commons and the new technology that disrupted the assumption that party leaders have to participate in debates to reach their supporters.⁵ In 2008, the Green Party leader was excluded until the leaders of other parties and the broadcast consortium relented in the face of public backlash, yet in the next federal election she was deemed to be

ineligible. These factors came to a head in 2015 when Prime Minister Stephen Harper refused to participate in the traditional consortium-produced English debate. Critics charged that Harper wanted to avoid the scrutiny that comes with the large audiences of the broadcast consortium debates. A fraction of Canadians watched the handful of debates compared with the 14 million who watched the consortium-organized debates four years earlier. The Institute for Research on Public Policy, in its consultations with academics, journalists, and democratic stakeholders, concluded that the hodge-podge of debates in that campaign did not serve democracy well.⁶ As part of its democratic reform initiative, the federal Liberal government tasked an independent commission to organize a debate in each official language. It marked an attempt to reinvigorate the tradition of having larger regular debates. Presumably, an objective was to ensure that the democratic exercise would become an institution in which party leaders feel compelled to participate.

Led by former Governor General – and moderator of the 1979 debate – David Johnston, the commission had two significant roles: to organize the production, promotion, and distribution of the debates and to report to Parliament following the 2019 election on the lessons learned from producing the debates. Organizing the debates meant dealing with the thorny issue of determining which party leaders could participate on the stage.

Unlike other countries – including the United States, which has a long tradition of an independent commission – in Canada the people behind the first Leaders’ Debate Commission often felt as if they were “building the plane while it was in the air.” Making the debates happen – that is, formally designating an organizational partner that would be responsible for producing the events – comprised the biggest role and the most time for the commission. Consistent with federal procurement requirements, the Leaders’ Debate Commission issued a request for interest and later a request for proposals from prospective media organizations or groups interested in producing the debates. Commission staff spent months detailing what they wanted from the debate producer and then

negotiating with the media producers to put on the big show. A jury composed of two members of the commission and two independent experts then judged the submissions. The commission aimed to produce a journalistically rigorous debate that engaged millions of Canadians. In addition to making the debates free of charge to any group or individual who wanted to stream or distribute video and audio, the commission was determined to make the content as accessible and inclusive as possible. It aimed to reach the broadest audience on both traditional and social media.

Duties in an Election Campaign

Although the debates organized by the Leaders' Debate Commission happened two weeks before election day, a lot of the work required to make them happen occurred long before politicians started campaigning. The federal Liberal government appointed an independent commissioner to lead the institution. David Johnston then hired staff. In its early days, commission staff turned to experts and other debate organizers around the world with a mind to making “debates a more predictable, reliable, and stable element of federal election campaigns.”⁷ With values of democratic citizenship, civic education, and inclusion in the foreground, the commission consulted a wide cross-section of everyday Canadians and experts about how best to structure, deliver, and raise awareness about the debates. In its first few months, commission staff spent time researching and consulting with experts on how best to produce high-quality debates. To that end, the commission teamed up with like-minded civic groups to promote the debates. The commission also collaborated with the academically rigorous Canadian Election Study (CES) to conduct survey research before the debates to hear what Canadians wanted from them and afterward to hear if the debates delivered on their hopes.

In addition to consulting experts, the commission appointed a seven-member advisory panel – including former Liberal Deputy

Prime Minister John Manley, former Conservative MP Deborah Grey, and former New Democrat MP Megan Leslie – to act as a “sounding board” for the commission about everything from participating in the debates to getting more Canadians to engage critically with the debates. Commission staff met with forty experts and groups on issues ranging from accessibility and inclusivity to civic engagement and debate formats. Staff also met regularly with political party officials and news media executives in an effort to solicit their views and inform them of their ongoing work.

As noted above, debates are unfiltered and unedited national democratic events that offer brief opportunities for Canadians to hear directly from people who hope to lead the country. These opportunities infused the thinking and work of the commission. Mindful of the increasingly polarized Canadian electorate and the pernicious tactics of misinformation that currently mark politics internationally, commission staff hoped that the debates might combat nefarious foreign and domestic forces that want to influence the outcomes of elections and propagate dissension and distrust in democracy.⁸ Moreover, the public servants behind the debates wanted the events to penetrate the pervasive confirmation biases and filter bubbles that have people seeking information and news media that substantiate their views.⁹ Commission staff aspired to give Canadians a trusted political discourse free of partisan manipulation. They wanted to produce a real-time, unfiltered, democratic space where everyone gets to assess all the party leaders and their ideas on one stage at the same time.

In the months before the election campaign, the Leaders’ Debate Commission asked media companies to bid on a contract to produce the English and French debates. Tendering and bidding on federal government contracts comprise a complicated and arguably daunting process. The request for proposals prepared by commission staff for the federal leaders’ debate was a forty-two-page document of exacting requirements and mandatory evaluation criteria.¹⁰ Ultimately, nine media outlets teamed up to form the Canadian

Debate Production Partnership (CDPP) that won the \$1.5 million contract to produce the two events. The official request for proposals from media companies did not require them to team up to bid on the contract to produce the debates. Nevertheless, the commission recommended such a course, recognizing that the requirements for audience reach and broadcast quality indicated a media partnership.

The Leaders' Debate Commission issued some clear requirements for the CDPP; chief among them was that the media companies disseminate the debates widely at no cost. In the past, the consortium of broadcasters zealously guarded control of the debates. The commission changed the traditional consortium's exclusive broadcast and rebroadcast rights, requiring the CDPP to distribute the debates as widely as possible across the country on TV, radio, and digital media. Cineplex theatres live-streamed the debates on nearly two dozen of its megasized, high-definition screens free of charge. The CDPP made the debates more accessible than previous debates with American and Quebec Sign Language, closed-captioning, and described video. In addition to English and French instant translation, the CDPP offered multilingual simulcasts of the debates in Arabic, Cantonese, Inuktitut, Italian, Mandarin, Ojibwe, Plains Cree, and Punjabi. As well, the Leaders' Debate Commission, in its official request for proposals, asked the debate producers to produce events that allowed the leaders to have consequential and intelligent conversations about issues and topics that reflected the cultural, economic, and demographic diversity of Canada. Other than that stipulation from the commission, the partnership of media companies in charge of the debates had complete journalistic independence to produce the events, including format and questions.

In the days before the election campaign officially began, the CDPP announced that the two official debates would cover five topics: affordability and economic insecurity; national and global leadership; Indigenous issues; polarization, human rights, and immigration; and environment and energy. The CDPP relied on publicly available poll data and issues dominating the news media

to determine the topics and questions for the two debates. The Leaders' Debate Commission asked the CDPP to engage with Canadians about the debates' potential topics and questions. Almost nine thousand Canadians submitted questions to the CDPP through its many news media companies. From those thousands of responses, ten questions made it into the two debates. Both the English debate and the French debate were held at the Canadian Museum of History in Gatineau, Quebec, facing Parliament Hill before a live audience. An all-female cast of five prominent news anchors and political journalists were chosen as moderators of the English debate by the media organizations that made up the CDPP. The commission had no input into who were chosen as debate moderators. A CDPP spokesperson said that the moderators were chosen based on their journalistic skill and experience and their roles within their respective media organizations, not because of their gender.

In the weeks leading up to the debate, the commission mounted an extensive online public awareness campaign, encouraging people to watch the debates. It collaborated with groups to organize several watch parties across the country. The commission produced videos and memes for Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram to publicize the debates and raise awareness about how to watch them. The commission's website featured a "top ten" list of reasons that people should watch the leaders' debates. As well, the commission produced videos of David Johnston being questioned by his grandchildren on topics ranging from why people should watch the debates if they already knew whom they planned to vote for to the consequences of leaders saying untrue things during the debates. The commission also offered an online education tool for how to engage with the debates critically.

In the days leading up to the English debate, the commission made headlines for barring two right-wing media outlets from obtaining accreditation to cover the debates with the rest of the news media inside the Museum of History. Accreditation was necessary for reporters to speak with party leaders and their surrogates at the debates' venue after the events. In its accreditation policy, and

mindful of its responsibility to uphold high journalistic standards, the commission decided that only professional media organizations would be allowed to attend the debates and the media availability with the party leaders. *The Rebel Media* and the True North Centre for Public Policy were denied accreditation because the commission determined that they engaged in political activism that went beyond the norms of responsible journalism. The two media organizations' websites notably ran petitions and fundraising operations aimed at putting pressure on the prime minister to resign or to combat the carbon tax. True North and *The Rebel Media* petitioned the Federal Court to gain access, accusing the commission of acting in bad faith. A federal court justice agreed, ruling that the two media companies would suffer if they were not granted accreditation. In its court filing, True North claimed that blocking its access to the debates was tantamount to censorship. Lawyers for the commission argued, however, that there was nothing preventing the two organizations from reporting on the debates because they were broadcast freely online and on television and radio. Both news organizations were ultimately given access to the debates' venue. The lawsuit – and the public debate that it sparked – raised normative questions about who is a “professional” journalist and the role of advocacy in the news media. Supporters of *The Rebel Media* and True North wondered aloud about the *Toronto Star*'s participation in the debate given the newspaper's public commitment to a progressive mission and so-called Atkinson Principles.¹¹ The lawsuit also exposed the larger issue of nascent Canadian media organizations that provocatively test values regarding democracy, race, and gender.¹²

The debates drew big audiences. The English-language debate, with a reach of more than 14 million, penetrated the minds of almost four in ten Canadians. The French-language debate had a reach of almost 5 million. Beyond the conventional television audience, 4.3 million Canadians watched the debates through social media such as YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter. In comparison, this reach far surpassed the numbers of Canadians who watched and listened to the handful of independent debates organized in the previous

campaign. Although the debates organized by the commission drew big audiences, they also attracted the usual critiques from commentators and pundits about their format, topics, and questions.

As in other elections, the events' participants, format, questions, moderators, busy stage, and freewheeling contest among politicians received plenty of criticism. Historically, punditry about debates has been critical of the so-called gotcha moments, knockout punches, grandstanding, catcalling, and crosstalk. These perennial critiques persisted in 2019, including concerns about the seriousness of the debates and questions about whether TV's demand for conflict outweighs the public interest.¹³ In addition, much of the analysis of the English debate suggested that six leaders sharing a stage – and the tight time limits required by that many leaders – made it hard for politicians to convey their ideas meaningfully or to engage in substantive debates with their counterparts. Some commentators wondered why Maxime Bernier, as the leader of a small party, and Bloc Québécois leader Yves-François Blanchet, a Quebec nationalist, had places on the English debate stage. With a mere forty-five seconds to make their points, leaders ended up with only about twenty minutes to speak during the entire debate. Concerns about length were compounded by the considerable crosstalk among the leaders, producing a frustrating and hard-to-comprehend cacophony at times. The leaders frequently pivoted from the questions posed by the moderators to other topics and talking points. Other criticisms focused on the quality and diversity of the questions and how the five moderators in the English-language debate moved quickly from question to question. Critics suggested that there were too many moderators and that they could have been stricter, reigning in the leaders when they strayed from the topic or talked over one another. The French-language debate rectified some of these concerns somewhat by dimming the lights over leaders when they were not eligible to speak, which helped to quell the side talk. Despite these usual critiques, many viewers watched for more than fifty minutes, suggesting that they found the debates worthwhile.

After the debates, commission staff turned their attention to producing a report for Parliament, detailing key findings, lessons learned, and recommendations. The head of the commission acknowledged the prevalent dissatisfaction with the format of the English debate, suggesting that the post-mortems would likely contain suggestions for improvement.¹⁴ Commissioner Johnston even welcomed the criticism, calling it “important.”¹⁵ He floated the idea of hosting additional debates with fewer moderators and leaders, perhaps featuring only the main contenders for prime minister. Anticipating inevitable criticisms, the commission engaged political scientists with the CES to ask Canadian voters what they got out of the debates and what they liked and did not like about the format and topics. Most of this type of commentary about the debates is arguably subjective. The commission wanted data addressing the long-standing criticisms about the debates’ format and questions. The CES findings will inform the commission’s final report and recommendations.

Overcoming Obstacles

By far, the most prickly issue that the Leaders’ Debate Commission faced during the campaign was determining whether or not the leader of the People’s Party of Canada (PPC) would be allowed to participate in the two debates. When it established the commission, the federal Liberal government dictated that a party must meet two of three criteria in order to be part of the debates:

- 1 elected at least one MP under the party’s banner;
- 2 intend to field candidates in 90 percent of the country’s ridings;
and
- 3 received at least 4 percent of the vote in the previous federal election or have a legitimate chance, taking into account the recent political context, of electing candidates in the upcoming election.

The third factor was difficult for the commission because it is more subjective. Initially, the commission did not invite Maxime Bernier to the debates. Stressing that the decision was not final, Commissioner Johnston asked him to provide more information to bolster his case for participation. Specifically, the PPC was invited to suggest three to five ridings where it thought it had a chance of winning.

The commissioner wanted a reasoned, deliberative, and transparent process to determine the basis for Bernier's inclusion or exclusion. Participation affords party leaders considerable media exposure, and the decision can have positive or negative effects on the campaign. Therefore, the commission was determined to interpret and apply the federal government's criteria for participation fairly. The question about participation triggered considerable discussion within the commission and plenty of work for the staff. The weight of the decision was tangible. The commissioner sought the advice of experts and the commission's seven-member advisory panel about applying the participation criteria. Ultimately, though, the final decision rested with the independent commissioner.

Unable to rely on national polls that showed the PPC polling from 1 to 5 percent, the commission hired EKOS Research Associates to conduct surveys in three ridings in Ontario and one in Manitoba where the PPC said it had a chance of winning. The random bilingual surveys, using interactive voice response, asked people how likely they were to vote for the People's Party of Canada. Mindful of not wanting to influence voters, the commission did not ask the traditional horse-race question about vote intention. In each riding, four to five hundred voters were surveyed. The results were weighted using Statistics Canada data about age, gender, and education to approximate a representative sample. The riding-level poll results suggested that between 24.5 percent and 34.1 percent of respondents might vote for the PPC. A historical analysis of voting conducted by the polling firm Nanos Research for the commission concluded that it is possible to win a riding with a quarter

of the vote. Ultimately, the PPC received 1.6 percent of the total vote share, and none of its candidates was elected. Bernier himself was not re-elected. This information was obviously not available before the debates.

The commission also looked at the political context, identifying ten indicators to measure the PPC's organizational strength and prominence. In addition to looking at the party's membership, fundraising, and ability to attract candidates, the commission considered media penetration. Commission staff was keen to know whether or not the PPC's ideas on issues such as climate change, immigration, and fiscal responsibility had currency beyond its political base. Based on polling numbers and its evaluation of the political context, three weeks before the debates the commissioner decided that the PPC met two of the three criteria for participation. As expected, the inclusion of Bernier sparked controversy. His exclusion likely would have also triggered dissent. After the election, Johnston conceded that the six leaders made for a busy stage and that the bar for participation might have been too low.

Canada's first Leaders' Debate Commission arranged two official debates that reached millions more Canadians than the mishmash of small independent debates in the previous election. The commission produced a collective media event for voters to evaluate the politicians hoping to lead Canada. Whether the debates had any significant influence on voters' decisions remains a puzzle for political science. Yet the efforts of the commission did prove that there is a different way for Canada to organize how its leaders debate one another. Moreover, the research commissioned by the commission about the format of the debates could offer useful data for addressing perpetual critiques of these important democratic events. Ultimately, MPs will decide whether or not the Leaders' Debate Commission becomes a fixture of Canadian democracy.

Notes

- ¹ Katz and Dayan, “Media Events.”
- ² The campaign also featured two leaders’ debates hosted by *Maclean’s*/Citytv and Quebec’s TVA. Prime Minister Trudeau did not participate in the *Maclean’s*/Citytv debate, which drew an audience of 1.6 million people. The TVA debate attracted 1.2 million viewers. These debates were outside the mandate of the commission and therefore are not examined in this chapter.
- ³ Blais and Boyer, “Assessing the Impact of Televised Debates.”
- ⁴ Johnston et al., *Letting the People Decide*; Blais et al., “Campaign Dynamics in the 1997 Canadian Election”; Nevitte et al., *Unsteady State*.
- ⁵ Institute for Research on Public Policy, “Creating an Independent Commission for Federal Leaders’ Debates.”
- ⁶ Ibid.
- ⁷ Leaders’ Debate Commission, “Mandate and Roles.”
- ⁸ On the polarized electorate, see Johnston, “Affective Polarization in the Canadian Party System 1988–2015.”
- ⁹ Warner and Ryan Neville-Shepard, “The Polarizing Influence of Fragmented Media.”
- ¹⁰ Government of Canada, “Debates Producer Request for Proposals.”
- ¹¹ Joseph Atkinson was a long-time publisher of the *Toronto Star* who espoused progressive editorial principles that remain the basis for its “intellectual foundation,” including “a strong, united and independent Canada; social justice, individual and civil liberties, community and civic engagement; the rights of working people; and the necessary role of government.” *Toronto Star*, “The Star Mission and Atkinson Principles.”
- ¹² Adams, “Who Is a Journalist?”
- ¹³ Paas-Lang, “Viewership Up, but Format Questions Remain for Leaders’ Debates.”
- ¹⁴ Wright, “Debates Commissioner David Johnston Suggests Separate Debate for Main Contenders.”
- ¹⁵ Ibid.

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