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Abstract

Do leaders of challenger parties adopt a ‘niche’ strategy in national televised debates?

This paper answers this question by analysing the content of the two *multiparty* televised leaders’ debates that took place ahead of the 2015 British general election. Using computer-aided text analysis (CATA), it provides reliable and valid measures of what the leaders said in both debates and develops our theoretical understanding of how challenger-party leaders make their pitches. It finds that the UKIP, Green, SNP and Plaid Cymru leaders all demonstrated a degree of ‘nicheness’ in their contributions in comparison with the Conservative, Liberal Democrat and Labour leaders. It also finds that the challenger-party leaders placed a greater emphasis on their core concerns. Nevertheless, the debates covered much policy ground. Their structure obliged all party leaders to talk about mainstream issues.

Introduction

The 2015 general election featured Britain's first national *multiparty* televised leaders' debate. Hosted by the broadcaster ITV, it brought together the Conservative prime minister David Cameron, the Liberal Democrat deputy prime minister Nick Clegg, Labour's Ed Miliband, the United Kingdom Independence Party's (UKIP) Nigel Farage, the Green Party's Natalie Bennett, the Scottish National Party's (SNP) Nicola Sturgeon and Plaid Cymru's Leanne Wood. Two weeks later the BBC broadcast a five-way debate featuring Miliband, Farage, Bennett, Sturgeon and Wood. The 2015 debates were thus markedly different from those in 2010, when Cameron, Clegg and the then Labour prime minister Gordon Brown all took part in three contests (Bailey, 2012; Pattie and Johnston, 2011). While the earlier debates had been framed as 'prime ministerial' contests (Coleman, 2011; Benoit and Benoit-Bryan, 2013), the 2015 debates could not be.¹ Partly for this reason, they did not dominate the 2015 campaign as they had in 2010 (Bailey, 2012). Nevertheless, the 2015 debates were major campaign events. They were watched by millions of viewers and attracted significant media attention (Cowley and Kavanagh, 2016: 286-287). What the leaders said in them mattered.

In the wake of the 2010 debates, we analysed the leaders' words and sought to develop our theoretical understanding of party behaviour in televised debates (Allen et al., 2013). This paper is partly a sequel to and partly an extension of that study. We again draw on theories of party competition to interpret the leaders' words in 2015, and we again use computer-aided text analysis (CATA) to provide reliable and valid measures of the issues they emphasised. In this paper, however, we focus primarily on the words of the four challenger-party leaders: Farage, Bennett, Sturgeon and Wood. In particular, we examine the extent to which their contributions differed to those of

the mainstream-party leaders and how ‘niche’ they were in terms of the policy areas they emphasised (Meguid, 2005, 2008; Meyer and Miller, 2015).

Our conceptual distinction between ‘challenger’ and ‘niche’ parties is important. Following De Vries and Hobolt (2012: 251), we define challenger parties in the context of Westminster elections as parties that have not previously held cabinet-level posts.² Mainstream parties, in contrast, are those that have held national political office. By niche, we refer to a particular characteristic of some parties, a tendency to emphasise policy areas neglected by rivals (Meyer and Miller, 2015). To minimise confusion, we avoid using the term ‘mainstream’ when talking about parties’ issue emphases. While challenger parties are likely to pursue niche strategies in order to differentiate themselves from mainstream parties (De Vries and Hobolt, 2012; Meyer and Wagner, 2013), they need not do so. Indeed, their choice of strategy may be complicated by regional dynamics: challenger parties in the context of national elections may be mainstream parties in the context of regional elections (McAngus, 2016).

Our focus on the challenger parties in the 2015 debates is in no way meant to downplay the importance of the ‘prime ministerial’ contest between Cameron and Miliband. It simply reflects theoretical and practical considerations. There has been little research into how challenger parties behave in national televised debates. There is a particular need to develop relevant knowledge and theory in the context of the fragmenting British party system (Webb, 2000; Quinn, 2013; Brandenburg and Johns, 2014). Given the general decline in the established major parties’ shares of the vote, it seems likely that challenger parties will be included in future debates. If their leaders address a relatively narrow range of issues, then broadcasters may need to adapt their

rules to meet their public-service objectives of informing and educating the electorate (Kuhn, 2007: 42–57).

Focusing on the challenger parties also provides a necessary dose of analytical clarity for analysing *both* 2015 debates. The UKIP, Green, SNP and Plaid Cymru leaders were present in both contests. The incumbent prime minister and deputy prime minister, Cameron and Clegg, only participated in one. The leader of the opposition, Miliband, participated in both the ITV and BBC debates. His role shifted perceptibly, from being Cameron's principal rival in the first debate to being the sole representative of the Westminster establishment in the second (Cowley and Kavanagh, 2015: 187). These changes complicate any analysis of the 2015 debates and raise more questions—such as the effect of the incumbents' presence on other leaders' behaviour—than can be answered here. These changes also mean that the contents of the two 2015 debates are not strictly comparable. For similar reasons, only limited comparisons can be made with the 2010 debates.

We also recognise that the importance of televised debates rests on more than spoken words; viewers can also be swayed by visual images (Shephard and Johns, 2012). Nevertheless, words communicate policy intentions. By systematically analysing what issues the leaders emphasised in 2015, we contribute to our knowledge and understanding of both the 2015 election leaders' debates and broadcast debates more generally. By adapting Meyer and Miller's (2015) measure of nicheness, we also demonstrate how methods that draw on manifesto data to analyse long-term programmatic competition can be used in conjunction with other sources of evidence, in this case debate transcripts, to analyse campaign behaviour.

The remainder of the paper proceeds as follows. The next section sets out the rules and structure of the debates and the wider political context. The third section

introduces theories of party competition and campaigning that can be used to interpret the leaders' words in each debate. The fourth section introduces our data and two content-analytic methods, and the fifth reports our findings. The final section briefly evaluates the 2015 debates and discusses the implications of our findings.

Why were there multiparty debates in 2015?

The 2010 debates were not only the first in British electoral history; they also created an expectation that there would be similar contests in future (House of Lords Communications Committee, 2014). Yet, there was no guarantee that debates would take place in 2015. In the autumn of 2014, the BBC, ITV and Sky, who had organised the 2010 debates, now joined by Channel 4, wrote to David Cameron, Ed Miliband and Nick Clegg, as well as UKIP's Nigel Farage, inviting them to participate in a series of three debates, to be held fortnightly over the course of the 2015 general election campaign. One of the proposed debates would be a two-way contest between Cameron and Miliband; another would be a three-cornered debate and included Clegg; and a third debate would be a four-cornered contest that would also include Farage. The inclusion of UKIP reflected the party's growing electoral appeal and the broadcasters' legal obligations.³ UKIP had won more votes than any other party in the 2014 European Parliamentary elections, and the broadcasters correctly anticipated that it would be added to the regulator Ofcom's (2015) list of 'major' parties, alongside the Conservatives, Labour and the Liberal Democrats.

It was touch and go during the ensuing negotiations whether or not a deal would be struck (see Bailey, 2017). Cameron eventually agreed to take part in a single debate with six other party leaders: Clegg, Milliband and Farage, plus the Greens' Natalie Bennett, Plaid Cymru's Leanne Wood and Nicola Sturgeon, the SNP leader

and Scotland's first minister. ITV was the lucky broadcaster. The BBC made do with a five-way debate bringing together Miliband, Farage, Bennett, Wood and Sturgeon. Cameron also agreed to appear in two other special election programmes. He would be interviewed and answer audience questions in a Sky/Channel 4 production, as would Miliband. He would also take part in a special edition of the BBC's *Question Time* with Miliband and Clegg. In both cases, however, the leaders would appear separately and not be able to challenge their opponents. There would thus be a series of election programmes but only two debates, and just one of these would bring together all the main party leaders.

The outcome of the negotiations meant that the 2015 debates would be very different to those of five years earlier. The 2010 debates had followed a simple formula: three debates featuring all three major party leaders, each produced by a different broadcaster. The productions had also been partially coordinated, with each debate themed around a different topic—domestic affairs, international affairs and economics affairs respectively—and half the questions in each debate selected to reflect the relevant theme. There were only two debates in 2015, and they involved different sets of participants. There was also no thematic coordination across them. ITV and the BBC, the two broadcasters, retained full editorial independence over the choice of questions in their respective debates.

The 2015 debates also differed from the 2010 debates, and from each other, in other respects. Each of the three-way debates in 2010 had been 90 minutes in duration and covered eight questions. The seven-way debate in 2015 lasted 120 minutes and covered just four questions. The five-way challenger's debate lasted 90 minutes and included five questions. Fewer questions meant that, other things being equal, fewer issues could be addressed. The broadcasters responded by selecting questions that

bundled topics (summarised in Table 1). For example, the first question in ITV's debate was:

I would like to ask how do each of the party leaders believe they will be able to keep their promises of eliminating the deficit without raising certain taxes or making vast cuts to vital public services?

Similarly, the first question selected for the BBC's debate touched upon jobs, public spending and public debt:

As someone about to enter the job market, is it fair to increase government spending like so many of you plan to do, when my generation will be left to pay off the debt?

This bundling of issues gave the party leaders more freedom to emphasise issues. In the case of the first question, they could choose to say more about taxes or public services. In the case of the second, they could say more about jobs, spending or debt.

TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

As in 2010, the broadcasters gave participants up to 1 minute to respond to each question; but whereas in 2010 the leaders had been given a further minute to respond to the others' answers, in 2015 they would launch straight into a moderated debate after one round of responses. This feature of the 2015 debates gave the leaders additional freedom to emphasise their preferred policy areas. Moreover, the

moderated-debate segments were lengthened to accommodate a greater number of participants. In 2010, the three leaders debated for 4 minutes after each question (36% of the total broadcast time). In the 2015 ITV debate, the seven leaders debated for around 18 minutes after each question (60% of the total broadcast time). In the 2015 BBC debate, the five leaders debated for around 10 minutes after each question (56% of the total broadcast time). This rule again gave the leaders more freedom to emphasise their preferred policy areas than in 2010.

Issues and niche parties

Televised leaders' debates can be framed in different ways. Depending on the participants, they may be framed as contests between prospective heads of government, contests between potentially 'coalitionable' parties (Sartori, 1976), or contests between parties fighting for votes in the same ideological space. All these frames were present in at least one of the two 2015 debates, but not all were present in both. The questions we might potentially ask, as well as what we can infer from the leaders' words, are thus different for each debate.

We sidestep these problems by specifying separate hypotheses for each debate and by framing our analysis around the four parties that were present in both of them: UKIP, the Greens, the SNP and Plaid Cymru. None of these parties had participated in the 2010 debates, nor had they ever held national political office. The SNP had, of course, held power in the Scottish Parliament since 2007, and Plaid Cymru had governed in coalition with Labour in the Welsh Assembly from 2007 to 2011. For this reason, they now arguably resemble mainstream parties, at least in the context of regional Scottish and Welsh electoral competition (McAngus, 2016). Nevertheless, they remained challenger parties in the context of the 2015 general election (De Vries

and Hobolt, 2012: 251). They also sought, like UKIP and the Greens, to challenge both the electoral dominance of the established mainstream parties and the established ways of British politics (Flinders, 2015: 244).

The literature on party competition suggests that parties have three basic ways of enhancing their standing among the electorate. The first is by taking different 'positions' on issues that involve disagreement about either core beliefs or specific policies (Downs, 1957). The second is by asserting their competence on 'valence' issues and their ability to achieve consensual outcomes, such as peace, prosperity, high-quality public services and security (Stokes, 1963). Yet, parties' ability to assert their competence is constrained by objective truths, such as economic indicators, NHS waiting lists and immigration statistics (Green and Jennings, 2012). Moreover, people's perceptions may be affected by the value they place on those outcomes.

A related but nonetheless distinct way in which parties can enhance their standing among voters is by focussing attention on issues that provide them with electoral advantage. Challenger parties may benefit from mobilising conflict on new issue dimensions or wedge issues, and taking a clear position on them (De Vries and Hobolt, 2012; Van de Wardt et al., 2016). Mainstream parties may benefit from an enduring reputation for competence in certain policy areas, in line with theories of 'issue ownership' (Budge and Farlie, 1983; Green and Hobolt, 2008). For example, the Conservatives have traditionally been regarded as the party of economic competence, Labour as the party of the public services (Newton, 1993). Ahead of the 2015 debates, both parties' reputations were pretty much at their usual levels: on average, across nine YouGov surveys conducted between January and April, the Conservatives enjoyed a 16-point lead over Labour in answer to the question of which

political party would best handle the economy. Labour enjoyed a 14-point lead over the Conservatives on the NHS.⁴

Measuring issue emphasis in text is much more straightforward than deriving positions or identifying assertions of competence.⁵ Partly for this reason, and partly because we were interested in their policy-information value, our analysis of the 2010 debates focused on the salience of key issues. We found limited evidence that leaders were able to emphasise those issues that advantaged them, in line with ownership theories (Allen et al., 2013). Brown, Cameron and Clegg did not consistently play to their issue strengths. This was partly because they were constrained by the rules, chiefly the question wording, and partly because they needed to show mastery across a range of issues in order to demonstrate their ability to be prime minister.

The different format of the 2015 debates allows us to re-visit the question of which issues leaders focus on when taking part in televised debates. In particular, the involvement of UKIP, the Greens, the SNP and Plaid Cymru enables us to develop our theoretical understanding of how challenger-party leaders behave in debates. Our expectations are informed by the literature on niche parties (Meguid, 2005, 2008; Adams et al., 2006; Ezrow, 2008; Ezrow et al., 2010; Meyer and Miller, 2015; Zons, 2016). These have been defined by their focus on issues that currently lie outside of the traditional left-right framework (Meguid, 2005, 2008) or those parties that ‘de-emphasize economic concerns and stress a small range of non-economic issues’ (Wagner, 2012: 847). A more minimal definition is that ‘a niche party emphasizes those policy areas neglected by its competitors’ (Meyer and Miller, 2015: 260).

The distinctiveness of a party’s policy emphasis can, of course, vary over time (Meyer and Wagner, 2013). It can also be affected by the strategic choices made by other parties in a system. Mainstream parties may take positions on previously

neglected issues if they attract voters (Carmines and Stimson 1990), though they may face greater constraints on their ability to do so (Meyer and Wagner, 2013). When new issues are taken up by mainstream parties, they are incorporated into the existing left-right structure (Stimson, 2004).

Instead of classifying parties categorically as being niche or not on the basis of their issue emphases, Meyer and Miller (2015) propose a continuous measure of nicheness that assesses the extent to which parties emphasise distinctive policy areas at any given point in time. It essentially averages a party's deviation from the mean emphasis across all relevant policy areas. According to this logic, party p 's nicheness score (σ) is represented by the following formula, where N denotes the number of relevant issues or policy areas, p denotes the number of parties in a given party system, x_{ip} is party p 's emphasis on policy area i , and $\bar{X}_{i,-p}$ is the average emphasis of all other parties on policy area i , weighted by party size:

$$\sigma_p = \sqrt{\frac{1}{N} \sum_{i=1}^N (x_{ip} - \bar{X}_{i,-p})^2}$$

This score can then be standardised to enable direct comparison of all parties within the system: scores less than zero indicate a party is less niche than the average party, scores above zero indicate a party is more niche (Meyer and Miller, 2015: 263). The relevant formula, where μ_{-p} represents the average nicheness of all other parties (excluding p) weighted by party size, is as follows:

$$\bar{\sigma}_p = \sigma_p - \mu_{-p}$$

Our first set of hypotheses reflects an expectation that the challenger-party leaders are likely to be relatively more niche across their overall contributions. On the basis of their broader programmes, UKIP, the Greens, the SNP and Plaid Cymru represent party families (hard Eurosceptic right, green and ethno-regionalist) usually categorised as niche, and all four parties have been identified as ‘niche’ parties in previous studies (Meguid, 2005, 2008; Lynch et al., 2012). Moreover, as challenger parties in the context of Westminster elections, they can be expected to focus on new issue dimensions (De Vries and Hobolt, 2012) or wedge issues (Van de Wardt, 2014), all of which are likely to be relatively neglected by the mainstream parties. Such a focus, in turn, is likely to contribute to their nicheness:

H1a: In the ITV debate, the contributions of Farage (UKIP), Bennett (Green), Sturgeon (SNP) and Wood (Plaid Cymru) will have higher nicheness scores than the contributions of Cameron (Conservative), Clegg (Liberal Democrat) and Miliband (Labour).

H1b: In the BBC debate, the contributions of Farage, Bennett, Sturgeon and Wood will have higher nicheness scores than the contributions Miliband.

Our other hypotheses relate to the particular issues that the four challenger party leaders are likely to emphasise on the basis of their broader ideological commitments (Strøm, 1990; Budge, 1994). *The* defining issue for UKIP is withdrawal from the European Union. Their focus on Europe reaped limited electoral rewards in previous general elections. From 2013 onwards, however, UKIP bundled the European issue with immigration, an issue of increasing and intense public concern.⁶

The party's electoral fortunes began to improve markedly (Goodwin and Milazzo, 2015). UKIP's central argument was that immigration could not be controlled while Britain remained a member of an EU that was committed to freedom of movement. The party's campaign slogans hammered away at these issues: 'Stop open door EU immigration: enough's enough'. Accordingly, we would expect Farage to emphasise these issues:

H2a: In the ITV debate, Farage emphasises Europe more than any other leader.

H2b: In the BBC debate, Farage emphasises Europe more than any other leader.

H3a: In the ITV debate, Farage emphasises immigration more than any other leader.

H3b: In the BBC debate, Farage emphasises immigration more than any other leader.

Ideological motivations also underpin our expectations about the Green Party. The natural environment, pollution and nuclear power are defining issues for the party (Carter, 2008). Responses to pollsters' 'most important issue' (MII) questions suggested that this concern was not shared among the public in 2015.⁷ Nor was there any evidence that the Greens were advantaged on these issues or could gain electoral

advantage by highlighting them. Nevertheless, Bennett could be expected to appeal to Green Party members by emphasising environmental concerns:

H4a: In the ITV debate, Bennett emphasises the environment more than any other leader.

H4b: In the BBC debate, Bennett emphasises the environment more than any other leader.

Our last issue-related hypotheses concern the strategies of the two nationalist parties, the SNP and Plaid Cymru. They both originated as vehicles to campaign for a different relationship with the rest of the United Kingdom, either home rule or, in the SNP's case, ideally independence. Other things being equal, we would expect them to emphasise a range of constitutional issues, in particular the need for decentralisation, Scottish and Welsh distinctiveness and the failings of the Westminster system:⁸

H5a: In the ITV debate, Sturgeon and Wood emphasise constitutional issues more than other leaders.

H5b: In the BBC debate, Sturgeon and Wood emphasise constitutional issues more than other leaders.

Data and methods

The raw material for our analyses was the verbatim transcripts of the two debates.

These were prepared by two of the authors using recordings of the debates and then

checked against the recordings by a third author. Table 2 reports the total number of words spoken by each leader in each debate.

TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE

The transcripts were analysed using Computer Assisted Text Analysis (CATA), specifically HAMLET II software (Brier and Hopp, n.d.). HAMLET II enables users to analyse word frequencies across texts, identify key words and create dedicated vocabularies around those words. It also enables users to break down texts into sections—such as leaders’ responses to questions or their opening and closing statements in debates—for separate analysis, and to designate coding units, such as paragraphs or sentences. For our analysis, the coding units were quasi-sentences (see Budge et al., 2001: 96), short passages delimited by standard punctuation conventions whether commas, semicolons or full stops. No content-analytic method is entirely free of all bias, but CATA reduces human intervention, making the measures extremely reliable (Bara et al., 2007). Moreover, since we code the transcripts according to clearly established rules, readers can easily identify any potential biases.

Measuring issue emphasis was essentially a matter of counting how many quasi-sentences were associated with particular policy areas. This was done through HAMLET II, which enables users to define coding categories and build lists of related words, including appropriate synonyms, abbreviations and word-strings. The software then uses these lists to identify automatically all quasi-sentences that contain at least one relevant entry. Each quasi-sentence can only be counted once under the same category but, depending on the words found, may be counted multiple times under

multiple categories. The results are then reported by category as a percentage of all quasi-sentences so counted.

Our coding categories were informed by both our hypotheses and the responses given in various MII questions posed by the British Election Study, YouGov and Ipsos MORI in the spring of 2015.⁹ Together, these responses covered a wide range of issues that mattered ahead of the election. Since the three organizations employed slightly different response categories, we merged some in order to produce a consistent set. A few of our categories, such as culture and transport, were discarded after preliminary analysis revealed they did not feature in the debates. Our analysis ultimately employed 17 categories. With one exception, each of these had its own exclusive list of entries. The exception was the category *austerity*. Since this issue touched upon economic considerations and the health of the public services, its list had to include words that overlapped with other categories.

Results

Tables 3 and 4 display the full results of our analysis of the ITV seven-way leaders' debate and the BBC five-way leaders' debate respectively. Each table reports the relative salience of our 17 categories in every leader's overall contribution, as well as in the debate as a whole. The final three rows report three aggregations of policy areas: a *total economy* measure, which reports the combined salience of *economy*, *jobs* and *tax*; a *total public services* measure, which combines *education* and *health*; and a *total security* measure, which aggregates *law and order*, *defence*, *Europe*, *foreign affairs* and *immigration*. These aggregations correspond broadly with three distinctive dimensions of political competition in contemporary Britain, a point we return to.

TABLES 3 AND 4 ABOUT HERE

The full results show that, in both debates, the party leaders emphasised a wide range of issues. The results also show that some categories were more sparsely populated than others. Among the individual categories, *constitution* (16%), *health* (14%), *economy* (10%), *jobs* (10%) and *education* (8%) were the five most-salient in the whole of ITV debate, while *constitution* (18%), *housing* (12%), *foreign affairs* (9%), *economy* (8%) and *defence* (8%) were the five-most salient categories in the BBC debate. To a large extent, these differences reflect the questions posed by the broadcasters. In the ITV debate, there were separate questions that explicitly referred to education and health, while the BBC debate included questions that explicitly addressed defence and housing (see Table 1). When the policy areas were aggregated, *total economy* (26%) was clearly the most salient in the first debate, ahead of *total public services* (22%) and *total security* (18%), while *total security* (24%) led *total economy* (18%) and *total public services* (9%) in the second debate. Again, these differences largely reflect the respective questions.

Turning to our specific hypotheses in respect of challenger parties, Table 5 reports the standardised nicheness scores for all party leaders participating in the debates. In order to calculate these scores, we followed the formulae presented by Meyer and Miller (2015). We measured party size on the basis of the proportion of words spoken by each leader in the relevant debate (see Table 2).¹⁰ This enabled us to measure the nicheness of the various leaders' contributions in the specific context of each debate.

TABLE 5 ABOUT HERE

The results are largely consistent with H1a and H1b. In the first debate, we expected Farage, Bennett, Sturgeon and Wood to have positive scores, which would indicate their issue emphasis was more niche than average. With the exception of Bennett, this was indeed the case, although the magnitude of the Green leader's negative score (-0.3) indicates that, while she was less niche than average, she was still more so than Cameron, Clegg and Miliband. In the second debate, which featured only one established major party, we expected Miliband to have the lowest score. The results indicate that his overall contribution was less niche than average (-0.7), but the SNP's Nicola Sturgeon (-0.8) was even less niche this debate. Plaid Cymru's Leanne Wood (-0.5) was also less niche than average in the context of the second debate, although not as much so as Miliband. Overall, then, the results confirm that the challenger parties were generally more niche in their contributions, but they also suggest that the presence or absence of incumbents may have had some effect on the relative nicheness of Britain's ethno-regionalist parties in particular.

Table 5 also includes, for the sake of comparison, the parties' nicheness scores in the wider British party system. Following Meyer and Miller (2015), these scores are based on 2015 Manifesto Project (MARPOR) data and the parties' share of the vote in the 2015 general election (Volkens et al., 2015). Their general consistency with the nicheness scores for the debates provides face validity for our analysis. The challenger parties were generally more niche in their policy emphases than the established parties. The notable exception was the SNP: its programme was less niche than average, in line with Sturgeon's words in the BBC debate if not the ITV debate. Indeed, these scores provide further support for the claim that the SNP increasingly

resembles a mainstream party (McAngus, 2016). They also raise intriguing questions about how a party's changing status in the context of regional government may influence its appeal and strategy in the context of national elections.

Our remaining hypotheses concerned the emphasis that the challenger party leaders placed on those policy areas that relate most strongly to their parties' programmes. For UKIP, we expected Farage to emphasise the issues of Europe and immigration more than the other leaders. The data in Tables 3 and 4 provide evidence to support H2a and H2b, but not H3a and H3b. His *Europe* salience measures (12% and 18% respectively) were comfortably the highest among all leaders in both debates. His *immigration* scores (6% and 4%) were not. Indeed, a greater proportion of Bennett's and Wood's contributions in the first debate (8% and 7%), and Bennett's and Sturgeon's in the second (6% and 8%), were devoted to the issue of immigration. This prominence was largely a reflection of these leaders' distinctly 'adversarial' response towards Farage's anti-immigration line (Meguid, 2005).¹¹ However, our data also reveal a heavy emphasis on foreign affairs in the UKIP leader's contributions, which often took the form of promises to reclaim sovereignty and control. Farage's scores for *foreign affairs* (17% and 15%) were the highest for this category, while his *total security* scores (37% and 46%), which also include *law and order* and *defence*, were also the highest. Much of UKIP's appeal rests on assertions of external threats and the promise of security by raising the 'drawbridge' (Quinn, 2006).

In terms of the Green Party, H4a and H4b predicted that Bennett would emphasise the environment more than any other leader. The relevant scores for the *environment* category in Tables 3 and 4 are in complete accord with both hypotheses. No other leader came close to emphasising the issue as prominently as Bennett in either the ITV (8%) or BBC debate (10%). She made a pitch for Green votes despite

the lack of an obvious cue in any of the questions, for instance, talking about climate change and mass extinctions in response to ITV's last question on young people's futures, and protecting Britain's 'natural environment' in response to the BBC's fourth question on immigration (see Table 1).

Lastly, in terms of Plaid Cymru and the SNP, H5a and H5b predicted that Wood and Sturgeon would emphasise what we term constitutional issues more than the other leaders. Again, the evidence from Tables 3 and 4 bears this out. In both the ITV and BBC debates, *constitution* received more attention in Wood's (31% and 25%) and Sturgeon's contributions (24% and 20%) than in those of any party leader. The prominence of the issue in Wood's contributions is especially striking.

While our hypotheses were concerned primarily with the challenger-party leaders, it is also worth reflecting on the prominence that the other party leaders gave to issues. One of the striking findings from Table 3 is that they notably higher in their emphasis on *total economy* and *total public services* than the challenger-party leaders. When the contributions of Cameron, Miliband and Clegg, and Farage, Bennett, Sturgeon and Wood are aggregated and analysed (not shown in Table 3), the established major parties' *total economy* score is 31%, compared with 20% for the challenger parties; and their combined *total public services* score is 25%, compared with 18%. Overall, these numbers reveal how political debate at Westminster, at least defined on the basis of mainstream-party competition, continues to be a matter of 'the economy plus public services, stupid' (Crewe, 2001).

Although it was not our intention, our findings also provide some support for issue-ownership theories, particularly in terms of what Cameron chose to emphasise. Economic issues were notably salient in Cameron's contributions in the ITV debate, as shown for the scores for *economy* (10%), *tax* (12%) and *jobs* (12%). Likewise his

total *economy score* (34%) was the highest of any leader in either debate. These findings are in accord with the Conservatives' electoral strategy in 2015. They led Labour as the best party on the economy, as seen, while their campaign posters rammed home a message of relative competence: 'Let's stay on the road to a stronger economy', and 'A recovering economy; don't let Labour ruin it'. Miliband, by contrast, did not speak about the public services as much as might have been expected given Labour's traditional affinity for them. Miliband's emphasis scores for *health* (18%) and *total public services* (25%) were only marginally greater than Cameron's (17% and 24% respectively). They were also less than Clegg's (21% and 28%), who may have been seeking to put some distance between himself and his coalition partner, Cameron, by emphasising his party's commitment to public services.

As a final test of hypotheses H2a to H5b, we also analysed the leaders' opening and closing statements in each debate. These sections were unconstrained by questions and interactions with other participants. They invited all leaders to be niche, at least for a moment, by enabling them to focus on their 'ideal' pitch to viewers.¹² If we expect challenger parties to emphasise their defining issues across debates, we would expect such an emphasis to be especially pronounced in the opening and closing statements.

TABLES 6 AND 7 ABOUT HERE

Tables 6 and 7 report the results of the CATA analyses. The brevity of the opening and closing statements means the data should be approached with some caution, but they provide further support for our general findings. Farage's scores for *Europe* (13% and 5%) and especially *immigration* (13% and 11%) were greater than

any other leaders' in both the ITV and BBC debates, Bennett's *environment* scores (19% and 27%) were relatively greater still, and both Sturgeon (49% and 41%) and Wood (75% and 33%) comfortably outscored the others on *constitution*. The data in Table 6 also confirm the apparent tendency for the established major parties to focus more than insurgent parties on the traditional bread-and-butter issues of the economy and the public services. And as the relevant *total economy* score (64%) shows, no one watching the first debate could have missed Cameron's attempt to reassure voters about his party's 'long-term economic plan'.

Discussion

After much uncertainty, two national televised leaders' debates were held ahead of the 2015 British general election. They were multiparty affairs rather than the obviously prime ministerial contests of 2010. Indeed, the incumbent prime minister only participated in one of them.

In this paper, we applied CATA to transcripts of both the ITV and BBC debates to summarise the participants' words and to develop our theoretical understanding of how party leaders behave. Because of the debates' multiparty format, and because they featured a changing cast, we framed our analysis around the challenger parties. We found that Farage, Bennett, Sturgeon and Wood—the leaders of UKIP, the Greens, the SNP and Plaid Cymru respectively—demonstrated to varying degrees a relatively high degree of nicheness in their contributions. We also found that these parties emphasised their core concerns in line with expectations.

It is, of course, impossible to ascertain whether the challenger parties' presence in the 2015 debates distorted the balance of issues covered. Since there were no debates involving just the traditional major parties, we cannot know what the effect

of debating with Farage, Bennett, Sturgeon and Wood had on the issue emphases of Cameron, Clegg and Miliband. What is clear, however, is that the debates covered much policy ground. As with the 2010 debates, the rules of the game obliged the leaders to address a range of substantive issues. The leaders had to respond to the questions, even if they felt themselves to be at a disadvantage. Among the mainstream parties, this requirement was especially pronounced. In issue or policy terms, the debates did not become hijacked by minority concerns. Given the number of participants in both debates and the range of policy priorities they represented, the broadcasters arguably did a good job in their choice of questions and in their moderation of the debates.

While it was not the primary focus of the paper, this last point highlights the limits of applying salience theory to the analysis of leaders' debates, or at least to the words of mainstream party leaders. In an earlier study, we found that issue ownership did not help to predict the behaviour of party leaders (Allen et al., 2013). In our analysis of the 2015 debates, we again found little evidence that the major party leaders acted as if they 'owned' certain issues. At the very least, the language of 'ownership' with its connotation of exclusive possession does not seem entirely appropriate for understanding the dynamics of leaders' debates. In the ITV debate, Cameron did not act as if he thought he had nothing to say about health, education or housing, and Miliband did not act as if he had nothing of value to say on the economy, immigration or Europe. Both leaders had much to say about issues that arguably advantaged their principal rivals.

Moreover, the 2015 leaders' debates, like all debates, demonstrated how, in political campaigning, politicians bundle together issues or try to change the dimensionality of an argument. To some extent they were helped by the broadcasters'

choice of questions, but in response to almost every question, all the leaders to varying degrees behaved heresthetically (Riker, 1986). Cameron countered every attack on his record on the public services with the proposition that increased spending was only possible because the economy was growing. Farage used questions about the deficit and the NHS to attack the European Union and levels of migration. Bennett highlighted the environment where possible. Debates are ultimately based on the proposition that those with the better arguments win. They have to be approached on the basis that participants will say something about almost everything. Focusing on issue emphasis can only get us so far.

Finally, while our findings relate only to a small set of parties and a single case, they do suggest that challenger parties, representing a range of ideological traditions, tend to pursue niche strategies in televised election debates. Further research is clearly needed to establish whether other types of challenger parties in other political systems behave similarly. At the same, our findings also suggest that challenger-party leaders vary in how much they emphasise policy areas neglected by their rivals when debating. This last point provides further support for the contention that party nicheness should be viewed as a continuous rather than a dichotomous variable (Meyer and Miller, 2015). On close inspection, there is rarely if ever such a thing as a pure single-issue niche party. Moving beyond such categories is essential if we are to develop our theoretical understanding of election debates and political campaigning more generally.

Notes

¹ Only Cameron, the incumbent, and Miliband, the leader of the opposition, had a plausible expectation of being able to do so after the election.

² In the British context, the term ‘insurgent party’ is often used as a synonym for challenger party (Curtice, 2014; Goodwin and Milazzo, 2015: 13).

³ In particular, section 319 (2) (c) of *Communications Act 2003* and section 44 of *The Agreement accompanying the BBC Charter 2006*, required news to be presented with ‘due impartiality’.

⁴ Averaging across surveys irons out the periodic fluctuations and produces a more reliable estimate of importance. The monthly data are reported in YouGov (2015a).

⁵ See Laver et al. (2003) for a method of inferring positions from text and Lowe (2008) for a discussion of the necessary conditions for this method to be valid.

⁶ Across nine YouGov (2015b) surveys conducted between January and April 2015, some 50% of respondents on average selected ‘immigration’ as one of three ‘most important issues facing the country’.

⁷ Across nine YouGov (2015b) surveys conducted between January and April 2015, just 8% of respondents on average selected ‘environment’ as one of three most important issues.

⁸ Our ‘constitutional’ category also includes general appeals to Scotland and Wales. While these could be viewed simply as appeals to the economic interests of the regions, we regard them as being constitutional given the centrality of national autonomy to the two parties’ programmes.

⁹ The British Election Study categories came from Wave 5 of its 2014-2017 Internet Panel, in particular the responses of a ‘core sample’ intended for cross-sectional analysis. The question was: ‘As far as you’re concerned, what is the SINGLE MOST

important issue facing the country at the present time?’ The YouGov categories came from nine surveys fielded between January and April 2015. The question was: ‘Which of the following do you think are the most important issues facing the country at this time? Please tick up to three’. The Ipsos MORI categories were drawn from its ‘Issues Index April 2015’. The question was: ‘What would you say is the most important issue facing Britain today?’

¹⁰ These proportions themselves reflected editorial decisions and attempts by the broadcasters to allocate airtime in some degree of proportion to parties’ electoral and political significance.

¹¹ Whereas the Tories and Labour both feared losing votes to UKIP over this issue (Cowley and Kavangh, 2016: 52-56, 86-88), the other challenger parties did not. Any increase in the salience of immigration was unlikely to hurt their support. As a result, Bennett, Sturgeon and Wood were perhaps more willing to tackle this issue head on.

¹² The likelihood that all leaders are likely to focus very narrowly on a small range of issues in their opening and closing statements makes it problematic to apply Meyer and Wagner’s nicheness measure to just these parts of the debate. Since mainstream-party leaders are just as likely as challenger-party leaders to focus on a small range of key issues in their opening and closing statements, they will, by definition, neglect a large number of other issues. For example, Cameron’s intense focus on the economy in his opening and closing statements in the ITV debate (see Table 6) gave him a very high niche score (4.3), second only to Leanne Wood (6.2). Other than confirming that Cameron’s narrow focus on the economy set him apart from the others in the opening and closing statements, it would be stretching the concept somewhat to suggest that he was adopting a ‘niche’ strategy in doing so.

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TABLE 1: The issues covered by the 2015 questions

Debate	Question number	Topics covered
ITV seven-way leaders' debate 2 April 2015	1	Deficit, taxation, public services
	2	The NHS, taxation
	3	Immigration, Europe
	4	Youth, education, pensions, public debt, housing
BBC five-way leaders' debate 16 April 2015	1	Government spending, public debt, jobs, youth
	2	Housing, social housing
	3	Defence, Trident
	4	Immigration, public services
	5	Post-election deals

TABLE 2: The leaders' verbal contributions to the 2015 debates

Leader	Party	ITV debate		BBC debate	
		N	%	N	%
Cameron	Con	4,105	20.4	---	---
Clegg	Lib Dem	3,120	15.5	---	---
Miliband	Lab	3,670	18.2	4,005	29.8
Farage	UKIP	2,721	13.5	2,682	19.9
Bennett	Green	2,196	10.9	2,370	17.6
Sturgeon	SNP	2,615	13.0	2,638	19.6
Wood	PC	1,702	8.5	1,765	13.1
Total		20,129	100	13,460	100

TABLE 3: Issue salience (% of contributions) in ITV's seven-way leaders' debate

Issue category	Cameron	Clegg	Miliband	Farage	Bennett	Sturgeon	Wood	Whole debate
Austerity	6	6	4	6	7	10	14	7
Constitution	8	12	13	11	11	24	31	16
Law and order	0	1	0	1	1	0	0	0
Defence	1	1	1	1	1	3	0	1
Economy	10	11	6	10	13	11	8	10
Education	7	7	7	8	9	8	4	8
Environment	0	0	1	0	8	0	1	1
Europe	7	5	4	12	6	3	8	6
Family	3	4	3	1	2	3	0	2
Foreign affairs	3	4	4	17	5	3	3	5
Health	17	21	18	10	10	10	13	14
Housing	2	3	3	2	2	5	0	3
Immigration	5	6	3	6	8	3	7	5
Inequality	1	4	4	3	5	0	1	2
Tax	12	4	9	3	3	5	0	6
Jobs	12	12	17	5	7	7	8	10
Welfare	4	1	1	2	1	5	2	2
Total economy	34	27	32	18	23	23	17	26
Total public services	24	28	25	18	19	18	17	22
Total security	17	17	13	37	21	12	18	18

Percentages have been rounded to the nearest integer.

TABLE 4: Issue salience (% of contributions) in the BBC's five-way leaders' debate

Issue category	Miliband	Farage	Bennett	Sturgeon	Wood	Whole debate
Austerity	5	6	5	8	9	6
Constitution	19	13	10	20	25	18
Law and order	0	0	0	1	2	1
Defence	7	9	7	13	7	8
Economy	3	11	10	7	10	8
Education	2	1	2	3	0	2
Environment	2	0	10	0	0	3
Europe	3	18	2	2	1	1
Family	3	0	1	3	1	2
Foreign affairs	8	15	8	11	6	9
Health	11	3	7	5	7	8
Housing	13	7	15	15	13	12
Immigration	3	4	6	8	4	5
Inequality	3	3	4	0	2	2
Tax	8	4	1	1	3	3
Jobs	9	3	8	4	8	7
Welfare	2	1	4	2	2	2
Total economy	20	18	19	11	22	18
Total public services	13	4	9	8	7	9
Total security	21	46	23	34	19	24

Percentages have been rounded to the nearest integer.

TABLE 5: Standardised nicheness scores for the party leaders

	Party	ITV debate	BBC debate	MARPOR
Cameron	Con	-0.6	---	-1.0
Clegg	Lib Dem	-1.2	---	0.3
Miliband	Lab	-0.5	-0.7	-0.7
Farage	UKIP	1.2	1.9	1.7
Bennett	Green	-0.3	0.2	6.1
Sturgeon	SNP	0.4	-0.8	-0.5
Wood	PC	2.2	-0.5	2.8

TABLE 6: Issue salience (% of contributions) in the leaders' opening and closing statements in the ITV debate

Issue category	Cameron	Clegg	Miliband	Farage	Bennett	Sturgeon	Wood
Europe	0	0	0	13	0	0	0
Immigration	0	0	0	13	3	0	0
Environment	0	0	8	0	19	0	5
Constitution	0	33	20	25	35	49	75
Total economy	64	39	40	25	14	19	10
Total public services	6	11	28	0	8	3	0
Total security	15	0	0	44	3	11	0

Percentages have been rounded to the nearest integer.

TABLE 7: Issue salience (% of contributions) in the leaders' opening and closing statements in the BBC debate

Issue category	Miliband	Farage	Bennett	Sturgeon	Wood
Europe	3	5	3	0	0
Immigration	0	11	0	0	0
Environment	3	0	27	0	0
Constitution	7	16	17	41	33
Total economy	34	47	17	21	29
Total public services	24	0	10	10	5
Total security	7	37	3	7	5

Percentages have been rounded to the nearest integer.