

Brexit - Balance or Bias on BBC Question Time?

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Background

- BBC's flagship political debate programme
 - 1,500 episodes (1979-present)
- Weekly panel of politicians, journalists & commentators
- Political elites questioned directly by the public

Format applied in other countries:

- Questions & Answers (RTÉ, 1986-2009)
- Q+A (ABC, 2008-present)

Accusations of bias in its:

- Audience selection
- Panel selection



Accusations of bias in its:

- Audience selection
- **Panel selection**

EXPRESS 

BBC bias: Question Time's most frequent panellists are ALL Remainers

THE BBC was slammed for inflicting "Remainergeddon" on its viewers after it was revealed the broadcaster's most frequent Question Time panellists overwhelmingly voted for Remain, as the broadcasters faces new accusations of a pro-Brexit bias.

By **CHARLES HARRISON**

11:16, Sun, Aug 28, 2022 | UPDATED: 11:56, Sun, Aug 28, 2022



BOOKMARK 

369



"I believe there were some occasions when the **Brexit representation was unbalanced.**

"So if you ask me if I think Question Time seemed to have **more Remainers than Brexiteers**, the answer is yes."

"**There have been studies done** and I think there's been some acknowledgement that some aspects of the Brexit coverage, from time-to-time, was unbalanced."

BBC bias confirmed: Incoming chair admits Question Time panels are packed with Remainers

THE PROPOSED incoming Chair of the BBC has singled out Question Time for failing to be balanced on Brexit.

By **DAN FALVEY** POLITICAL CORRESPONDENT

15:00, Thu, Jan 14, 2021 | UPDATED: 17:25, Thu, Jan 14, 2021



400



Journalistic Studies

- **Think tanks**

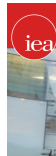
Institute of Economic Affairs (2016-17)

- **Bloggers**

Joel Rogrigues (2017-2019)

- **Anonymous episode trackers**

Question Time Watch (2016-2021)

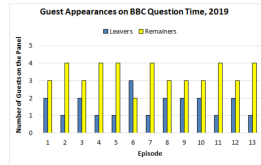


GOVERNMENT AND INSTITUTIONS

IEA analysis shows systemic bias against 'Leave' supporters on flagship BBC political programmes

31 JANUARY 2018

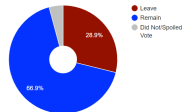
So far in 2019, the Question Time panel has looked like the following:



Question Time Watch

Watching since the EU referendum until Brexit

Of the panelists that have stated their vote



Relevance

- Limitations of previous analyses
 - Measuring EU attitudes, baseline benchmarks, selecting on the dependent variable
- Role of media & public broadcasting in democracies
 - Source of information on current events and party policies
 - Public engagement in politics
- Political communication outwith election campaigns

Research Questions

1. Was panel selection on the programme biased on Brexit?
2. How do we measure Brexit attitudes in the post-referendum period?
3. Against what baseline should bias be measured?

Academic Studies

- **Single episode case studies** (Anstead & O'Loughlin, 2011; Cranfield, 2012)
- **Interviews with broadcasters** (Mair et al., 2003)
- **Online engagement, second screen social networks** (Anstead & O'Loughlin, 2011; Doughty et. al., 2012)

Theory

Gap in existing research between:

Representation

- In political bodies and policymaking
- Substantive & descriptive representation (Pitkin, 1967; Heath, 2013)

Media studies

- Factual accuracy and balance of news coverage
- Bias in journalism and news media (Street, 2011)

Data

BBCQT Appearances

- Collected panellist information for all appearances between 1979-2019 (6300 apps, 1400 eps)
- Combination of web-scraping and hand coding
- **Variables:** Party affiliation, gender, ethnicity, educational background, occupation, (EU attitudes 2015-2019)

Measuring Attitudes towards the EU

2015-2017

- Clear divide centred around leave/remain referendum options
- Growing fragmentation of Brexit views post-referendum



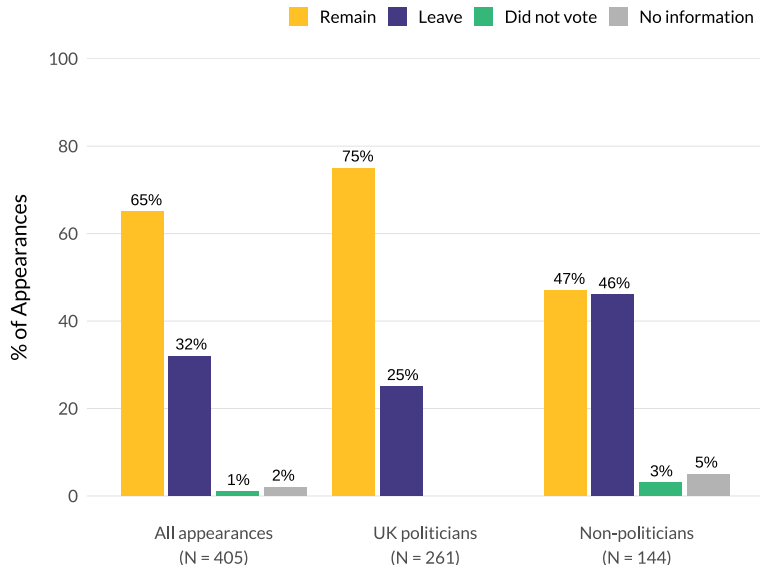
Measuring Attitudes towards the EU

Positions emerging by 2017 GE

- | | |
|-----------------------------------------|-------------------------|
| 1. Favours remain/reversing brexit | • LDem/SNP/Green |
| 2. Seeks deal, open to remain | • Lab |
| 3. Seeks deal, against remain & no-deal | • Lab/Con |
| 4. Seeks deal, open to no-deal | • Con/Lab |
| 5. Favours hard brexit/no-deal | • UKIP/Con |

BBCQT Panellists' EU Referendum Vote Choice

All BBCQT appearances between 2015 and 2017 UK general elections



2016 MPs

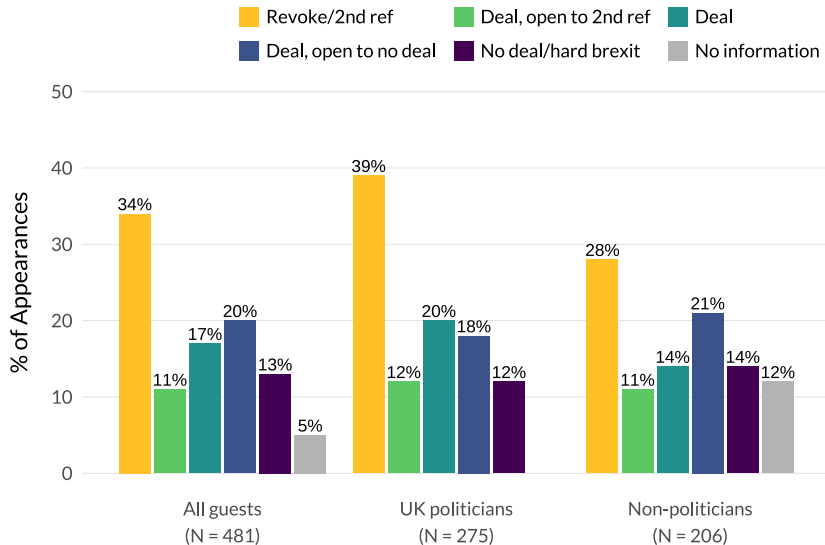
- 74% Remain

Brexit result

- 52% Leave
- 48% Remain

BBCQT Panellists' Brexit Preferences

All BBCQT appearances between 2017 and 2019 UK general elections



Indicative votes

- 42% 2nd Ref
- 25% No deal

YouGov Polling

- 38% Remain
- 17% No deal
- 30% Deal

Data

UK MP Dataset

- Collected political and demographic data on UK MPs in 2015 and 2017 parliaments
- Party affiliation, EU attitudes, gender, ethnicity, educational background, wikipedia views, previous show appearances

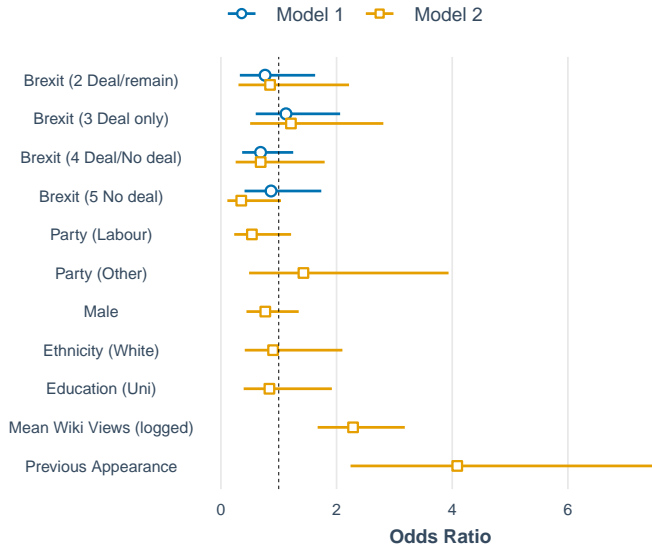
Hypotheses

- H1:** 'Remain' supporting MPs were more likely to appear on the program compared to 'Leave' supporters (2015-17)
- H2:** MPs with stronger pro-Brexit stances were less likely to appear on the program (2017-19)

Figure: 2015–17 UK MP BBCQT Appearances



Figure: 2017-19 UK MP BBCQT Appearances



Results

Brexit representation well-matched between:

- **Politician guests** and **parliament**
- **Non-politicians** and **public attitudes**
- No sig. differences in MP selection between Brexit groups
- Across both time periods (2015-17, 2017-19)
- Biggest predictors: previous appearance, wikipedia views

Future Research

- Descriptive representation:
 - Gender, ethnicity, educational background
- Regional & cross-national comparisons
- Online claims of bias, social media

Conclusions

Claims of Brexit related bias not supported after accounting for:

- Defining appropriate baseline comparison groups
- Measuring evolving EU attitudes over time

Thanks for listening!

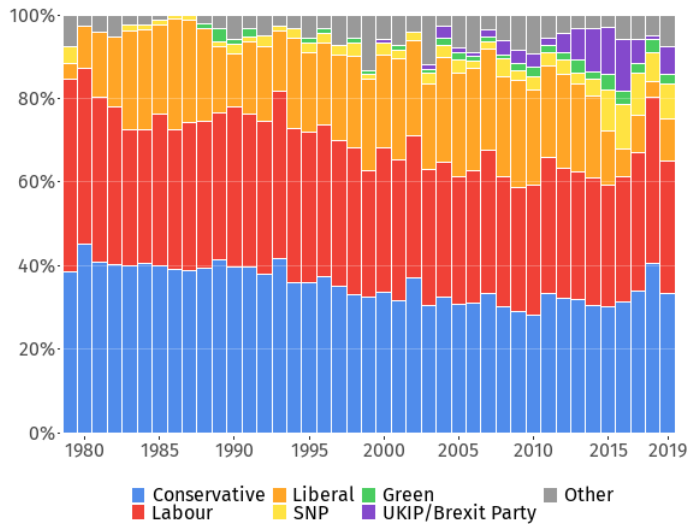
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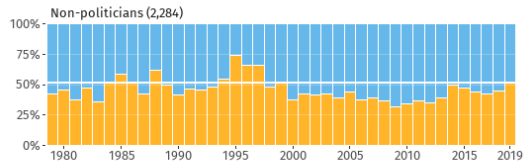
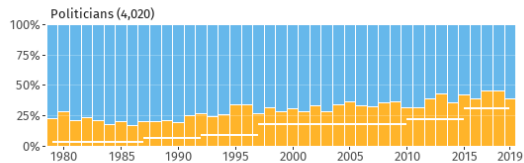
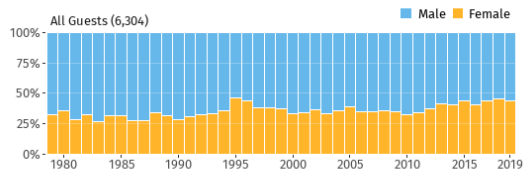
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BBCQT Politician Appearances by Party



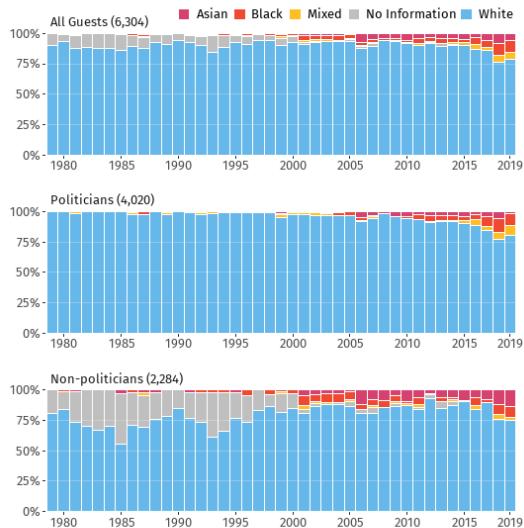
Gender Balance of BBCQT Appearances



Politician guest baseline: % Female MPs (3-32%)

Non-politician guest baseline: % Female UK population (51%)

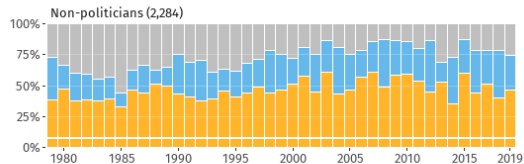
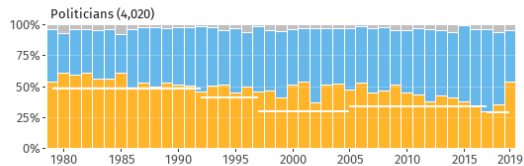
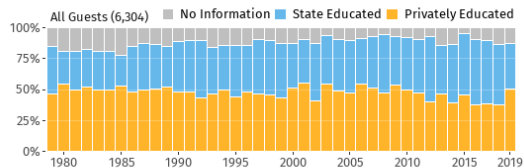
BBCQT Appearances by Ethnic Background



% Ethnic Minority MPs: 1979-1992 (<1%), 1992-2015 (<5%), 2015-2019 (<10%)

England & Wales Census, % Population non-white: 1991 (6%), 2001 (9%), 2011 (14%)

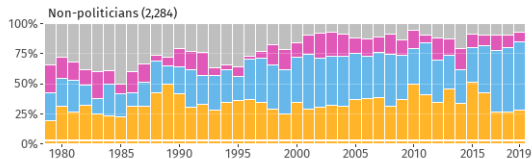
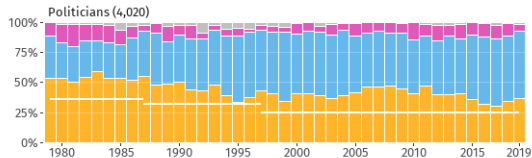
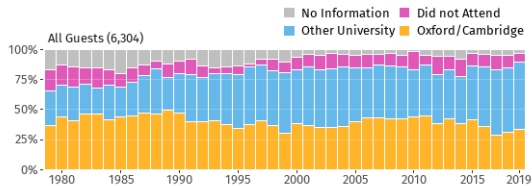
BBCQT Appearances by Educational Background (School)



Politician guest baseline: % MPs privately educated (29-49%)

Non-politician guest baseline: % UK population privately educated (5-7%)

BBCQT Appearances by Educational Background (University)

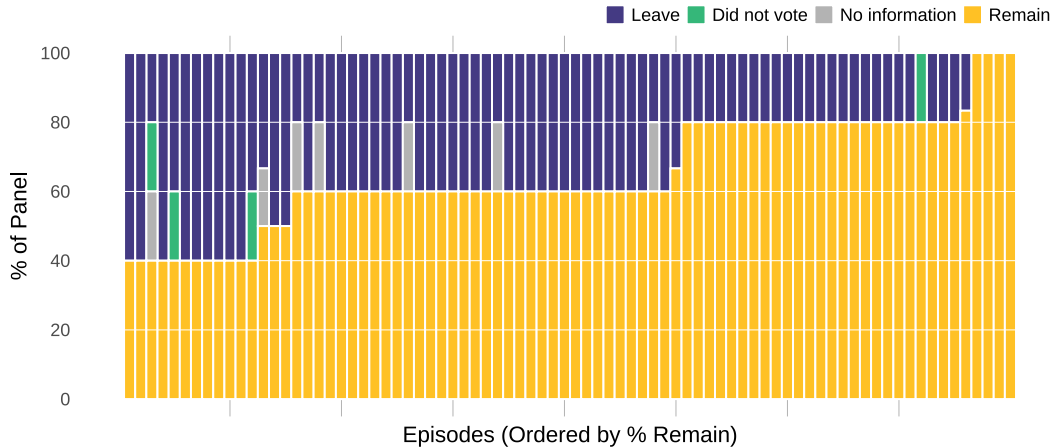


Politician guest baseline: % MPs attended Oxford/Cambridge (24-36%)

Non-politician guest baseline: % UK population attended Oxford/Cambridge (<1%)

BBCQT Panellists' Brexit Stance by Episode

Episodes between 2015 and 2017 UK general elections



BBC Website FAQs

How does Question Time select its panel members?

- "...aims to select a panel with a broad range of views, knowledge and experience, with panellists who are relevant to the big stories or debates of that week.

How do you decide which political parties are represented on Question Time?

- "...there will nearly always be a representative from the UK government and the official opposition on the panel"
- "...representatives from other political parties across the series, taking as our guide the level of electoral support at national level which each party enjoys"

Table: MP Brexit Views 2017-2019 by Party

	Con	Lab	Other
(1) Remain	10	139	54
(2) Deal/Remain	4	67	1
(3) Deal Only	66	48	1
(4) Deal/No Deal	156	4	7
(5) No Deal	81	2	3