

# Brexit - Balance or Bias on BBC Question Time?

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# Background

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- 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



The screenshot shows the top of a news article on the ChronicleLive website. The header is blue with the ChronicleLive logo and a search icon. The article title is in large, bold black text. Below the title is a sub-headline in smaller black text. A row of social media sharing icons (Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, Link) and a 'SHARE' button are visible. Below that is the author's name and title, and the date and time of publication.

**BBC Question Time criticised for 'misrepresenting' Newcastle as viewers felt forced to switch off**

Some BBC Question Time viewers said they had to switch off Tuesday's programme which was filmed in Newcastle

SHARE     151

By [Nicole Goodwin](#) Durham Reporter

16:00, 17 JUN 2022

## 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**

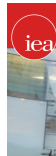
Institute of Economic Affairs (2016-17)

- **Bloggers**

Joel Rogrigues (2017-2019)

- **Anonymous episode trackers**

Question Time Watch (2016-2021)

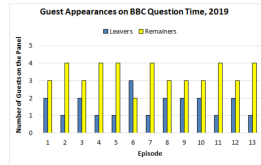


GOVERNMENT AND INSTITUTIONS

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

31 JANUARY 2018

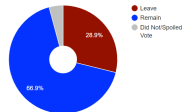
So far in 2019, the Question Time panel has looked like the following:



## Question Time Watch

Watching since the EU referendum until Brexit

Of the panelists that have stated their vote



# Relevance

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- 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

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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

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- **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

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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

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## BBCQT Appearances

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

# Measuring Attitudes towards the EU

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## 2015-2017

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



# Measuring Attitudes towards the EU

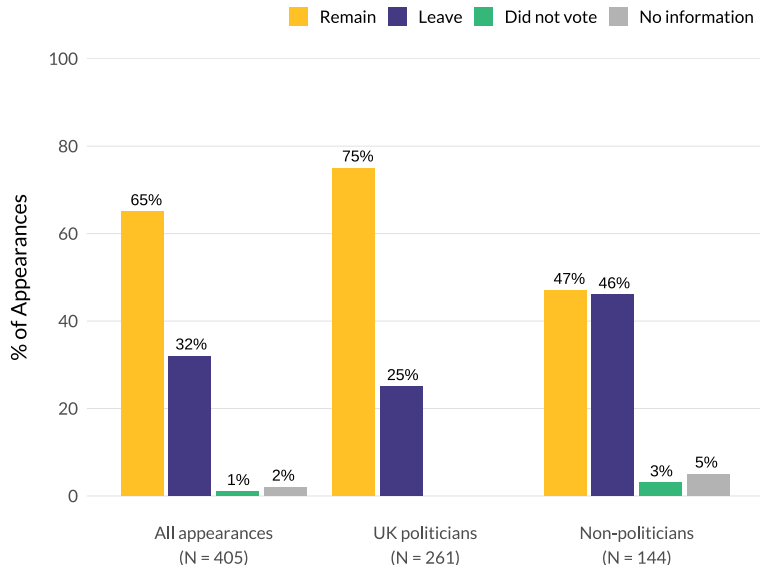
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## Positions emerging by 2017 GE

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

# BBCQT Panellists' EU Referendum Vote Choice

All BBCQT appearances between 2015 and 2017 UK general elections



## 2016 MPs

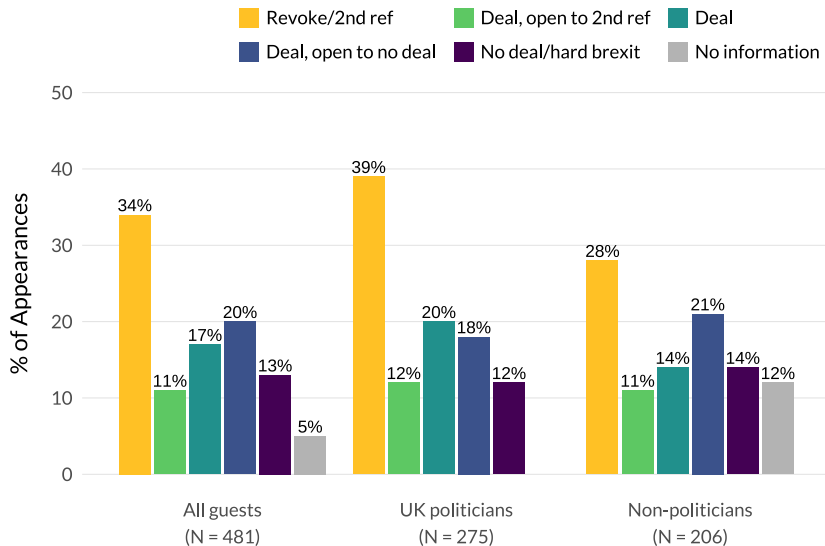
- 74% Remain

## 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

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## 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

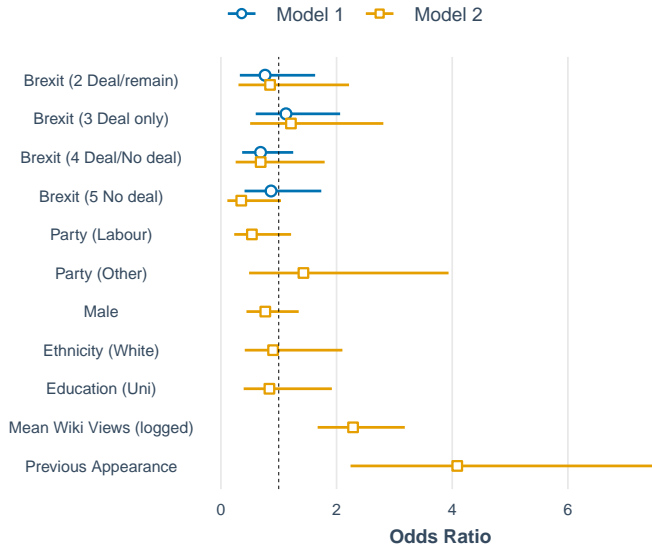
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- H1:** 'Remain' supporting MPs were more likely to appear on the program compared to 'Leave' supporters (2015-17)
- H2:** MPs with stronger pro-Brexit stances were less likely to appear on the program (2017-19)

Figure: 2015–17 UK MP BBCQT Appearances



Figure: 2017-19 UK MP BBCQT Appearances



# Results

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Brexit representation remarkably 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

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

# Conclusions

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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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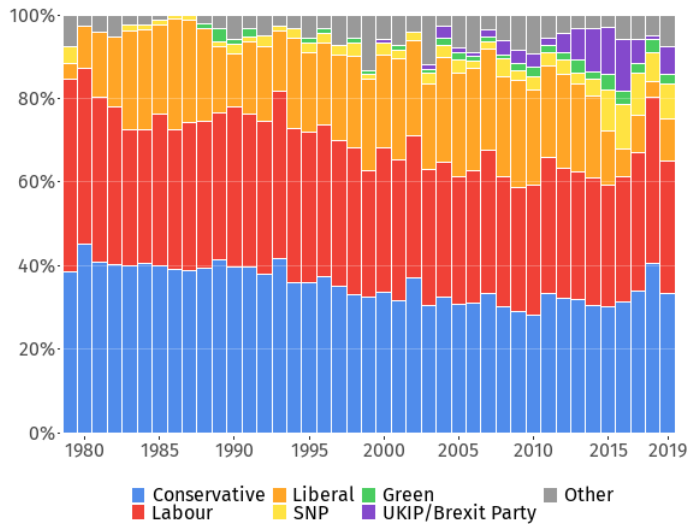


# References

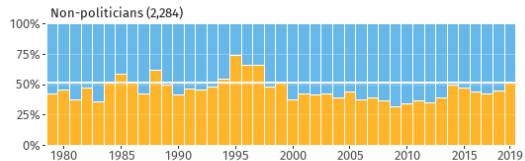
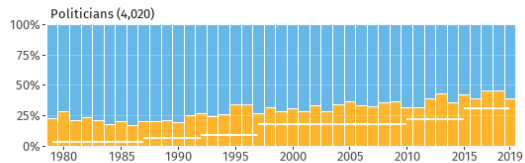
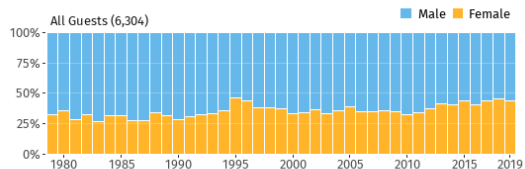
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BBCQT Politician Appearances by Party



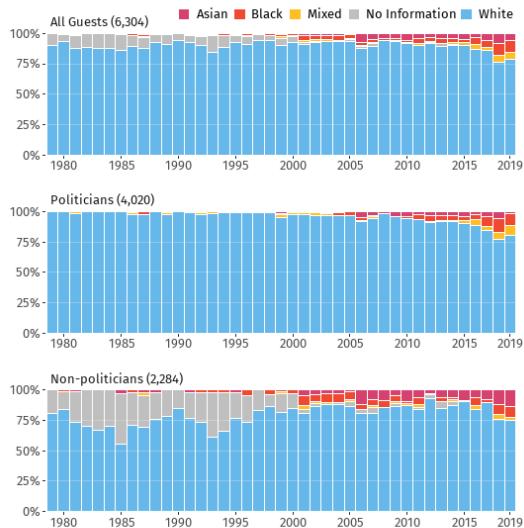
## Gender Balance of BBCQT Appearances



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

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

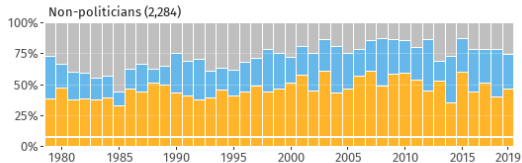
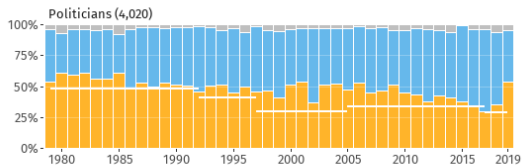
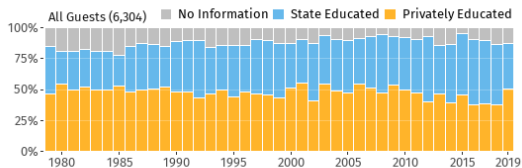
## BBCQT Appearances by Ethnic Background



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

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

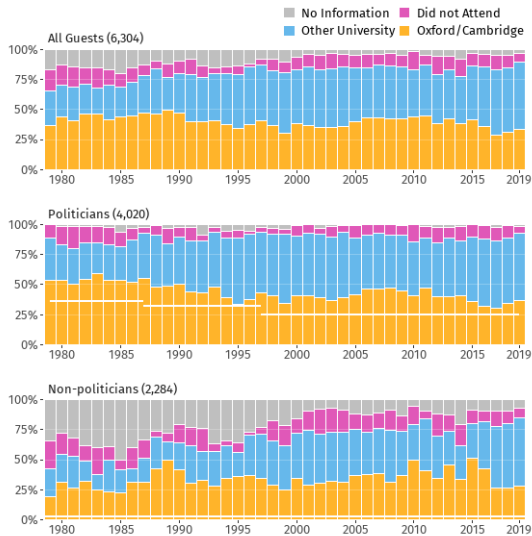
## BBCQT Appearances by Educational Background (School)



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

