

# Representation in UK Public Broadcasting

## Brexit & the Iraq War on BBC Question Time

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# Background

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

## Format applied in other countries:

- Questions & Answers (RTE), Q+A (ABC)

## Accusations of bias in its:

- Audience, Location, and **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**  
11:36, Sun, Aug 28, 2022 | UPDATED: 11:56, Sun, Aug 28, 2022



369 

# Background

## Labour MP Rupa Huq:

“One barometer people have of impartiality is the panels that you see on Question Time”.

## BBC Director of Editorial Policy:

“...trying to make sure that its **panels are gender representative, are ethnically diverse**, are geographically disparate, are **socioeconomically representative**, are **politically representative** of all of the different political parties in the country...”

## BBC bosses quizzed on 'massively unbalanced' Question Time panels

21st March



# Public Access Programming

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- 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. Which groups and viewpoints get represented in BBC Question Time panel selection?
2. How does this compare to the distribution of these groups in parliament and the public?

# Previous Work on BBCQT

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## Academic

- **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)

## Journalism

- **Think tanks** Institute of Economic Affairs (2016-17)
- **Bloggers** Joel Rogrigues (2017-2019)
- **Anonymous episode trackers** Question Time Watch (2016-2021)

# Theory

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## Media studies

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

## Representation

- In political bodies and policymaking
- **Descriptive** & **substantive** representation (Pitkin, 1967; Heath, 2013)

# 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 hand coding
- **Variables:** Party affiliation, gender, ethnicity, educational background, occupation



# Data

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## MPs biggest sub-group of panellists

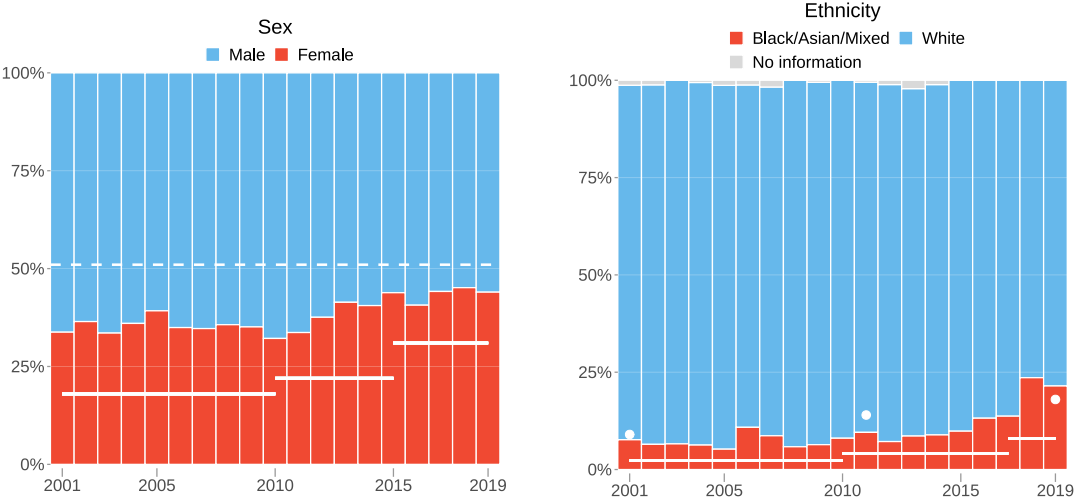
- 77% of all political guests

## UK MP Dataset

- Collected political and demographic data on UK MPs in the 2001, 2015 and 2017 parliaments
- Party affiliation, gender, ethnicity, educational background, wikipedia views, previous appearances, attitudes towards the **Iraq War**, and **the EU**

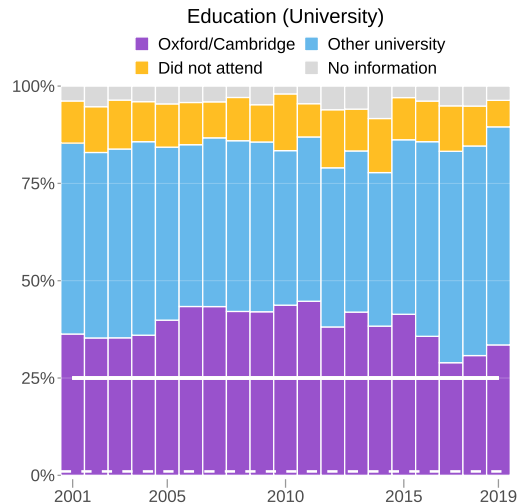
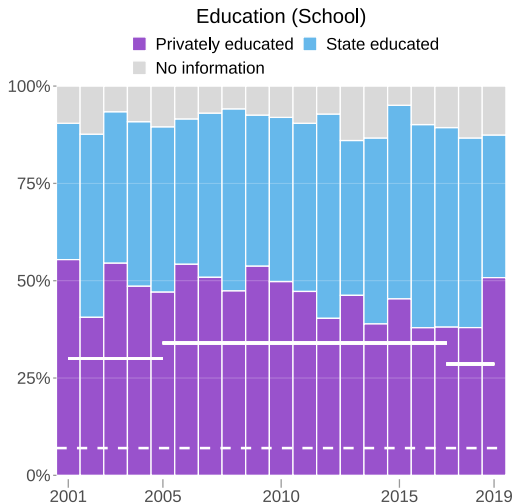
# **Descriptive Representation**

Figure 1. Sex and Ethnicity for All BBCQT Panellist Appearances (2001-2019)



Notes: Solid white line = % MPs in bottom category. Dashed white line/points = % UK population in bottom category.

Figure 2. Educational Background for All BBCQT Appearances (2001-2019)



Notes: Solid white line = % MPs in bottom category. Dashed white line/points = % UK population in bottom category.

	<b>BBCQT Appearances</b>		<b>Baseline Group</b>		<b>Net Difference</b>	
	Politicians	Others	UK MPs	UK public	MPs	Public
% Ethnic Minority	8	14	5	14	+3	0
% Female	36	41	25	51	+11	-10
% Private School	44	51	30	7	+14	+44
% Oxbridge	40	36	25	1	+15	+35

# **Substantive Issue Representation**

# Measuring Attitudes towards the Iraq War

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## 2002-2005

- Support/against 2003 UK invasion of Iraq
- Focus on attitudes at time of the invasion
- Parliamentary votes & publicly available text



# 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



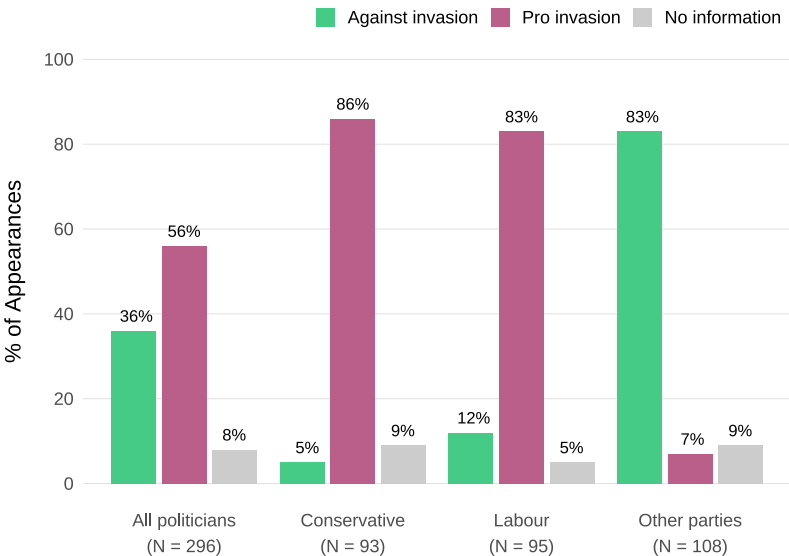


# Measuring Attitudes towards the EU

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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>       |

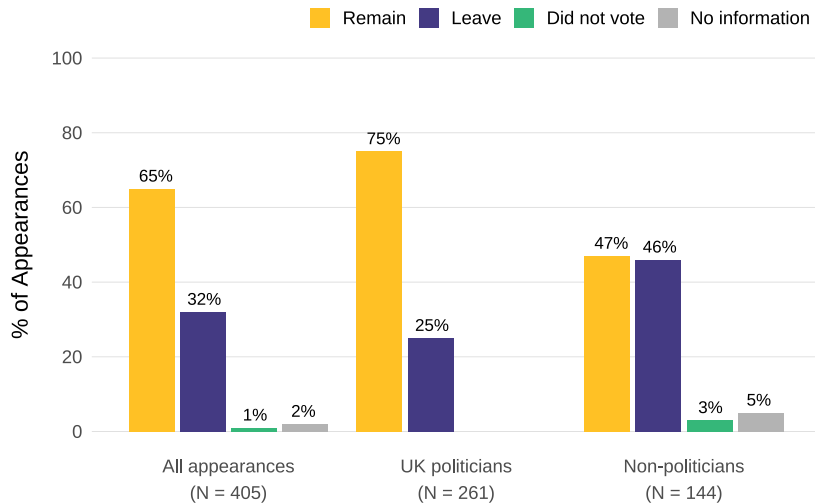


### All MPs 2001-05

- 66% For
- 34% Against

### MPs by party

- Con 91% For
- Lab 66% For
- Other 86% Against

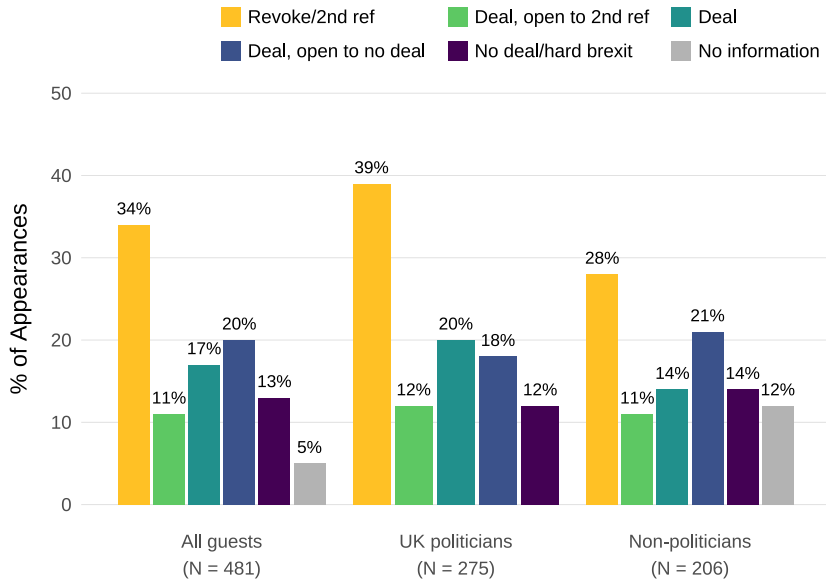


### 2016 MPs

- 74% Remain

### Brexit result

- 52% Leave
- 48% Remain



### Indicative votes

- 42% 2nd Ref
- 25% No deal

### YouGov Polling

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

# Summary

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- **Education** the biggest source of overrepresentation on BBCQT
  - Privately educated, attended Oxford/Cambridge
- **Pro- Iraq War** Labour politicians overrepresented
  - Compared to support among Labour MPs
- **No clear bias in Brexit representation** of MPs
  - Across both measures and time periods

# Upcoming Data Releases/Projects

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## Data

- All BBCQT appearances (1979-2019)
- Newspaper coverage (1980-2023)
- All audience questions (2010-2023)
- 10+ million BBCQT Tweets (2010-2023)

## Projects

- Social media and news media claims of bias
- Party representation over time

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# BBC Website FAQs

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## **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"

Parliament	Iraq War	Conservative	Labour	Other
2001-05	Against Invasion	14	139	68
	Pro Invasion	150	273	11

Parliament	Brexit	Conservative	Labour	Other
2015-17	Leave	143	10	10
	Remain	187	223	74
	Unknown	2	3	0
2017-19	Revoke/2nd Ref	10	139	51
	Deal/Ref	4	67	1
	Deal	66	48	1
	Deal/No deal	155	4	7
	No Deal	81	2	3