

Political Discourse Quality in a Bilingual Setting: A Study of French and English Leader's  
Debates in Canada

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Summary:

This paper evaluates the discourse quality of televised leaders' debates in the 2015 federal election. It draws on Steenbergen et al.'s (2003) Discourse Quality Index (DQI), which features measurement criteria such as respect, justification, and acknowledgment of counterarguments, to ascertain objective measures of deliberative quality in talk-centric political forums. A modified version of the DQI is applied to the Canadian context, where leaders must debate in two official languages. A content analysis codes the entirety of each party leaders' statements in accordance with six criteria, permitting an assessment of two related queries: 1) To what extent do Canadian federal leaders' debates qualify as deliberative exercises? 2) Does the quality of political appeals differ in English and French? Drawing on other scholarly applications of the DQI, the paper offers suggestions for how best to measure discourse quality in the debate format. It highlights potential causes and consequences of poor discourse quality in the most widely-viewed events of Canadian election campaigns.

Proponents of deliberative democracy argue that meaningful and legitimate democratic participation requires the exchange of reasons, rather than perfunctory occasional voting.<sup>1</sup> Accordingly, these deliberative democrats have proposed numerous standards by which to judge fair and authentic collective decision-making. In the last decade, an assemblage of empirically-minded scholarship has complemented a vast longstanding theoretical body of work. In terms of developing standardized observable measures of deliberation, Steenbergen et al.'s Discourse Quality Index (DQI) has gained considerable attention.<sup>2</sup> The DQI has been applied to parliamentary debates in the United Kingdom, Germany, and the EU Parliament, as well as parliamentary committees, public forums, and personal storytelling.<sup>3</sup>

As of yet, the DQI has not been applied to televised leaders' debates, which constitute a prominent site for potential deliberation. This paper proposes a modified DQI in the Canadian context, to evaluate French and English-language leaders' debates from the 2015 federal election. Deliberation in multilingual polities has received meagre attention.<sup>4</sup> Given the bilingual character of Canadian election campaigns, the quality of political appeals and deliberation may differ in English and in French. With respect to leaders' debates, this paper seeks to ascertain whether Canada's major linguistic groups experience similar discourse quality in the country's most widely-viewed political event. Should the DQI yield substantially different results for English and French debates, this suggests the production of divergent political experiences, which may affect attitudes towards party leaders, vote choice, and political participation. Conversely, if the quality of deliberation is minimally affected by language, this lends credence to an ideal view of election campaigns as a national dialogue.

More generally, this paper asks to what extent Canadian federal leaders' debates qualify as deliberative exercises. The modified DQI permits an assessment of discourse quality based on language, party leader, and issue area. The results suggest that there is little significant variation amongst these factors: party leaders and issue areas produce uniformly low DQI scores in both the English and French debates. The main exception to this finding is Green Party leader Elizabeth May –who scores higher than average in the English debate and lower than average in the French debate– a discrepancy which may be attributed to poor second language skills. It is argued that low DQI scores result from a lack of mutual respect between adversarial leaders,

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<sup>1</sup> David Kahane and Daniel Weinstock. 2010. "Introduction", in David Kahane, Daniel Weinstock, Melissa Williams, and Dominique Leydet eds. *Deliberative Democracy in Practice* (Vancouver: UBC Press) p.2.

<sup>2</sup> Marco R. Steenbergen, Andre Bachtiger, Markus Spörndli and Jurg Steiner. 2003. "Measuring Political Deliberation: A Discourse Quality Analysis," *European Comparative Politics*, pp. 21-48.

<sup>3</sup> For the UK case, see Steenbergen et al. 2003; André Bachtiger, Markus Spörndli, Marco R. Steenbergen and Jürg Steiner. 2005. "The Deliberative Dimensions of Legislatures," *Acta Politica* 40 (2). For a German example, see André Bächtiger Dominik Hangartner Pia Hess, and Céline Fraefel. 2008. "Patterns of Parliamentary Discourse: How 'Deliberative' are German Legislative Debates?" *German Politics* 17 (3), pp. 270-92. For the EU parliament, see Christopher Lord and Dionysia Tamvaki. 2012. "The politics of justification? Applying the 'Discourse Quality Index' to the study of the European Parliament" *European Political Science Review* 5 (1), pp. 27-54.

Parliamentary committees are analyzed by Lea Roger and Gary Schaal. 2013. "The Quality of Deliberation in Two Committees of the European Parliament: The Neglected Influence of the Situational Context and the Policymaking Stage," *Politics and Governance* 1 (2). For public forums see Soo-Hye Han, William William Schenck-Hamlin, and Donna Schenck-Hamlin. 2015. "Inclusion, Equality, and Discourse Quality in Citizen Deliberations on Broadband," *Journal of Public Deliberation* 11 (1).

<sup>4</sup> Irena Fikett, Espen Olsen, and Hans-Jorg Trenz. 2014. "Confronting European Diversity: Deliberation in a Transnational and Plurilingual Setting," *Javnost - The Public* 21 (2).

deliberative limitations inherent in such a debate format, and shortcomings of the DQI itself when applied to the debate context. Indeed, despite these alarmingly low DQI scores, the debates contained potentially useful elements of quality political discourse which were not captured by the index. Given the limitations of the DQI, the integration of alternate measurements of discourse quality are proposed for further investigation.

### *A. Deliberation and leaders' debates*

Gutmann and Thompson (2004) claim that “no subject has been more discussed in political theory in the last two decades than deliberative democracy.”<sup>5</sup> Many deliberative theorists emphasize mutual respect, open-mindedness, and the importance of inducing reflection amongst all participants.<sup>6</sup> Other scholars seek to bring moral argument into the public sphere, guided by conditions such as reciprocity, publicity, and accountability.<sup>7</sup> According to Weinstock and Kahane, all deliberative democrats share a commitment to two key ideas: “(1) *A thesis about democracy*: that democracy should be understood as the exchange of reasons rather than merely as the confrontation of contending interests; (2) *a thesis about liberal democracy*: that the justification of policies in liberal democracies should be more democratic.”<sup>8</sup>

However, practical advancements in this field depend on narrowing the gap between theory and practice.<sup>9</sup> In this respect, crucial questions revolve around what counts as “good” deliberation, in other words, what policy makers should hope to witness in deliberative forums, and how to enable deliberation such that collective decision-making is substantively improved. Indeed, not all communication is deliberative; deliberation is predicated on good faith reasoning and consensus-seeking. Ideal deliberation is open to all citizens who wish to participate, yet this can impose logistically challenging commitments.<sup>10</sup> Accordingly, some form of elite decision-making is inherent to all representative democracies. In this respect, meaningful deliberation in public forums is preferable to closed-door political maneuvering with limited accountability.

Leaders' debates constitute an important site of elite-level deliberation and have long been known to be crucial events in Canadian election campaigns.<sup>11</sup> As Blais et al. explain, they are “watched by a substantial fraction of the electorate... (and) have proved to be key events of

<sup>5</sup> Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson. 2004. *Why Deliberative Democracy?* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press) p. vii.

<sup>6</sup> John Dryzek. 2000. *Deliberative Democracy and Beyond: Liberals, Critics, Contestations* (New York: Oxford University Press) p. 2.

<sup>7</sup> Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson. 1996. *Democracy and Disagreement* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press).

<sup>8</sup> Kahane and Weinstock, p. 1.

<sup>9</sup> Georgina Blakely. 2014. “Conflict and Deliberation” in Stephen Elstub and Peter McLaverty eds. *Deliberative Democracy: Issues and Cases* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press). p. 17

<sup>10</sup> Gutmann and Thompson, 2004, p. 30.

<sup>11</sup> See André Blais, Richard Nadeau, Elisabeth Gidengil, and Neil Nevitte. 1999. “Campaign Dynamics in the 1997 Canadian Election.” *Canadian Public Policy* 25, p. 197–205.

André Blais and Martin Boyer. 1996. “Assessing the Impact of Televised Debates: The Case of the 1988 Canadian Election.” *British Journal of Political Science* 26, p. 143–164.

David Lanoue. 1991. “Debates That Mattered: Voters' Reactions to the 1984 Canadian Leadership Debates.” *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 24, p. 51–65.

previous Canadian election campaigns.”<sup>12</sup> The 2015 Maclean’s English-language debate was viewed by 4.3 million Canadians, while the French-language Radio-Canada debate reached 1.2 million homes.<sup>13</sup> Thus leaders’ debates are widely watched and scrutinized, and will in some cases have a discernable impact on electoral outcomes.<sup>14</sup>

Yet what can be said of the content of these debates? It is unlikely that contemporary leaders’ debates resemble an idealized oratorical universe of Lincoln versus Douglas. Nevertheless, scholarly optimism surrounding leaders’ debates and past empirical research conducted with the DQI would suggest that debates are likely to feature high quality discourse. Upon examining over 800 scholarly works on America Presidential debates, McKinney and Carlin (2004) conclude “after analyzing decades of research, we are convinced the debates do matter –that our democracy has been well served, that our citizenry has benefited from their leaders’ willingness to meet, face to face, seeking public support.”<sup>15</sup> The authors emphasize that debates are important in reaching minimally-attentive voters, generating citizen-to-citizen discussion and serving as a focal points for election campaigns.<sup>16</sup> Similarly, Pan et al. (2006) find that time spent watching leaders’ debates increases political awareness and interest.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, research conducted on parliamentary debates has generated encouraging results. As Lord and Tamvaki (2012) conclude, their findings measuring European Union parliamentary discourse “broadly indicate a high quality of deliberation, comparable to that recorded in studies of national parliamentary systems”<sup>18</sup> As compared to parliamentary debates, campaign debates allow for more free-flowing exchange of ideas. They typically have fewer stultifying procedures and formalities to contend with. Leaders are forced to address each others’ claims in a direct and immediate manner. The scrutiny of a high-profile event may also incentivize leaders to attempt to appear thoughtful, reasonable, or intelligent. In sum, if politics involves both law-making (execution) and choosing between political alternatives (deliberation), leaders’ debates should represent a prominent example of the latter.

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<sup>12</sup> André Blais, Elisabeth Gidengil, Richard Nadeau, and Neil Nevitte. 2003. “Campaign Dynamics in the 2000 Canadian Election: How the Leader Debates Salvaged the Conservative Party” *Political Science and Politics* 36 pp. 45-50. p. 46.

<sup>13</sup> See Aaron Hutchings, “The Numbers are in- and Millions Watched the Maclean’s Debate” *Maclean’s*, August 12, 2015. <http://www.macleans.ca/politics/the-numbers-are-in-and-millions-watched-the-macleans-debate> The 2011 English-language debate, held by the four members of the broadcast consortium drew even more viewers, with 10.6 million tuning in. Simon Houpt. 2015. “Federal leaders’ debate draws far fewer viewers than 2011 edition,” *Globe and Mail*. Monday August 10, 2015. <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/arts/books-and-media/federal-leaders-debate-draws-far-less-viewers-than-2011-edition/article25910569/> “Élections 2015 - le grand débat - Over 1.2 million Canadians watched the first French-language debate” *Newswire*. September 30, 2015. <http://www.newswire.ca/news-releases/elections-2015---le-grand-debat---over-12-million-canadians-watched-the-first-french-language-debate-530160581.html>

<sup>14</sup> Blais et al., 2003.

<sup>15</sup> Mitchell McKinney and Diana Carlin. 2004. “Political Campaign Debates” in Lydia Lee Kaid ed., *Handbook of Political Campaign Research* (New York: Taylor & Francis), p. 203-4.

<sup>16</sup> McKinney and Carlin, p. 203-4.

<sup>17</sup> Zhongdang Pan, Lijiang Shen, Hye-Jin Paek, and Ye Sun. 2006. “Mobilizing Political Talk in a Presidential Campaign,” *Communication Research* 33 (5), pp. 315-45. p. 323.

<sup>18</sup> Lord and Tamvaki, p. 41.

## ***B. Constructing the index***

### *Indicators*

Empirical investigations of deliberation require systematic and objective measures. This is precisely what Steenbergen et al. have achieved, in opening up deliberation to empirical research by operationalizing discourse quality with six key indicators. Measurement categories are rooted in Habermasian theory.<sup>19</sup> The units of analysis are individual speeches. Each relevant speech is coded according to six categories. The first dimension concerns participation, in terms of whether actors are free to speak rather than being constrained by interruptions. The second category involves the level of justification, in other words, the extent of reason-giving and how well these reasons are linked to conclusions. The third consists of the content of justification in terms of the constituencies to whom it applies. The fourth deals with respect paid to other actors and their demands. A fifth involves the acknowledgment of counterarguments. The final indicator asks whether actors embrace consensus building and move towards a constructive compromise.

For the purposes of analysing televised election debates, the DQI requires at least two principal modifications. The first addition is proposed by Lord and Tamvaki (2012), who suggest charting the nature and completeness of the reasons offered. Accordingly, they add an indicator which “attempts to accommodate the need for any parliament to satisfy rights to justification in relation to interests, values, and rights.”<sup>20</sup> The addition of this category is motivated by Habermas’ view that legitimate laws must be justified in terms of respecting the interests, values, and rights of the governed.<sup>21</sup> In the debate context, a speech which addressed all three items would receive the highest score. The second modification of the DQI involves the removal of the sixth indicator. The constructive politics indicator is inappropriate for a televised election debate setting. It is not reasonable to expect that leaders will perceptibly change their positions or work towards consensus during such a debate. In fact, so doing might be viewed as obfuscation, flip-flopping, or political weakness. In place of this indicator is a sixth category which measures the tone of the speech; in other words, whether this is a negative, positive, or neutral statement. The six modified DQI categories are as follows:

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<sup>19</sup> Steenbergen et al., 2003, p. 22.

<sup>20</sup> Lord and Tamvaki, p. 32.

<sup>21</sup> Lord and Tamvaki, p. 31.

Table 1: Six ordinal categories for the modified DQI scale

<p><i>Participation:</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>0. Speaker is interrupted</li> <li>1. Normal uninterrupted participation</li> </ol> <p><i>Level of Justification:</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>0. No justification. Speaker only says that X should or should not be done, but no reason is given</li> <li>1. Inferior justification: a reason Y is given why X should be or should not be done, but no linkage is made between X and Y –the inference is incomplete. This code also applies if a conclusion is merely supported with an illustration.</li> <li>2. Qualified justification: A linkage is made why one should expect that X contributes or detracts from Y (the means through which X contributes or detracts from Y is mentioned) A single such complete inference already qualifies for code 2.</li> <li>3. Sophisticated justification. Here at least two complete justifications are given, either two complete justifications for the same demand or complete justifications for two different demands</li> </ol> <p><i>Inclusiveness of Justification:</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>0. Explicit statement concerning group/particular interests <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Neutral statement</li> <li>2. Statement of the common good in utilitarian terms</li> <li>3. Statement of common good in terms of the difference principle</li> </ol> </li> </ol> <p><i>Content of justification:</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>0. No reference to interests, values or rights</li> <li>1. Interests: arguments refer to people’s material needs or security</li> <li>2. Values: arguments refer to Canadian and transnational values OR arguments refer to civic and human rights OR arguments refer to other normative standards (accountability, efficacy, transparency)</li> </ol> <p><i>Counterarguments:</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>0. Counterarguments ignored</li> <li>1. Counterarguments included but degraded</li> <li>2. Counterarguments included; treated neutrally</li> <li>3. Counterarguments included and valued</li> </ol> <p><i>Respect – tone of remarks:</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>0. Negative statements: either partisan or personal</li> <li>1. Neither/both positive and negative statements</li> <li>2. Positive statements</li> </ol>
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An additional departure from the original DQI methodology concerns the treatment of relevant units of analysis. Steenbergen et al. explain “The unit of analysis of the DQI is a speech...the entire discourse is broken down into smaller speech units. If an individual delivers multiple speeches, each is coded separately, even if the codes are the same as those for an earlier speech. If an individual is interrupted, then the interruption itself is also considered a speech.”<sup>22</sup> For the purposes of this analysis, interruptions, incomplete sentences, and crosstalk are not considered speeches. Instead, these disruptions are noted, but the initial discourse is still considered a single coherent speech. This approach helps to give speakers the opportunity to

<sup>22</sup> Steenbergen et al., 2003, p. 27.

develop their points, without restarting the DQI analysis from scratch. The alternative would frequently produce low DQI scores by depriving speakers of sufficient time needed for reasoning. Additionally, in the real world of political debate, interruptions rarely constitute deliberative discourse. Steenbergen et al. may have an overly optimistic view of the tenor and purpose of interruptions. Accordingly, only speeches with at least two full sentences are coded, with the rest treated as incomplete speeches.

### *Relevant speeches*

Determining what constitutes a relevant speech is an important yet contentious first step. Steenbergen et al. provide the following guideline: “A relevant part (of speech) is one that contains a demand, that is, a proposal on what decision should or should not be made. Irrelevant parts make no demands; these could be clarifying questions or remarks unrelated to the debate.”<sup>23</sup> In other words, demands involve proposals for what ought to and what ought not to be done.<sup>24</sup> Thus, the authors argue that demands constitute the heart of deliberation. Although Steenbergen et al. cast aside irrelevant speeches, this analysis will note every instance of both irrelevant and relevant speeches. In order to determine the extent to which leaders’ debates represent deliberative exercises, it is important to note the ratio of demands to non-demands, as well as any reasons why demands are not being made; in other words, what is being discussed if not various leaders’ proposals?

Furthermore, demands are not necessarily explicit statements about actions to be taken. For example, leaders may simply mention their party’s plan to address a given issue, and such language is taken as an endorsement of this plan as the correct course of action. Similarly, leaders may state their beliefs and opinions without explicitly proposing what ought to be done, by leaving viewers to connect the dots. Accordingly, relevant speeches for this analysis will include those containing implicit demands.

### *The linguistic context*

The French-English comparison helps to determine whether deliberation differs in a multilingual context. In terms of the speakers, a second language requirement may impair deliberation, since sophisticated expression is more challenging for non-native speakers. Conversely, debating in a second language could improve deliberation by rolling speakers back to the fundamentals in terms of constructing clear simple sentences and justifications, without the chance to lead auditors down a confusing road of political doublespeak. There is considerable variation in the party leaders’ linguistic abilities. Thomas Mulcair and Justin Trudeau are functionally bilingual,<sup>25</sup> Stephen Harper has limited fluency in French, and Elizabeth May has very limited fluency.<sup>26</sup> In terms of the linguistic audience, the opportunity to address Canada’s

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Lysiane Gagnon, among others, would disagree with this assessment of Justin Trudeau’s level of French. She writes “Le niveau de langue de Justin Trudeau, en français, est celui d’un cégépien anglophone qui aurait passé quelques années dans une classe d’immersion.” Meanwhile, Thomas Mulcair speaks French with a natural ease. Lysiane Gagnon. 2015. “Trudeau et ses cassettes,” *La Presse*. September 28, 2015. <http://www.lapresse.ca/debats/chroniques/lysiane-gagnon/201509/28/01-4904689-justin-trudeau-et-ses-cassettes.php>

<sup>26</sup> Judith Lachapelle. 2015. “Elizabeth May: a-t-elle progressé en français?” *La Presse*. September 26, 2015. <http://www.lapresse.ca/actualites/elections-federales/201509/25/01-4904065-elizabeth-may-a-t-elle-progresse-en-francais.php>

Francophone population – and specifically Quebecers who comprise the vast majority of this group– may increase deliberative quality. Quebecers constitute a subnational minority culture with distinct issues, values, and priorities. The focus on issues which are “closer to home” would conceivably increase accessibility to viewers and ease barriers to deliberation present when leaders must speak to all of English Canada. For example, it may be more inviting for leaders to deliberate on the future of the *Pont Champlain* than the balance of liberty and security necessary in legislation such as Bill C-51.

### C. Results

The DQI is an additive index. Each speech is coded based on the six categories and receives an overall DQI score. These scores are then added together and the average is calculated to form a composite DQI measure.

#### *English debate*

The English-language debate contained 148 total speech units, excluding interruptions, incomplete sentences, and crosstalk. Of these 148 speeches, only 53 speeches were coded as relevant. The remainder did not contain demands, and thus did not meet the aforementioned standards for deliberative claims. Each of the 53 speeches has a possible DQI score ranging from a minimum of 0 to a maximum of 14. These 53 individual scores sum to 274, the average of which yields a grand total DQI score of 5.16 for the English language debate.

Table 2. English debate, DQI by theme

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Total Speeches</b>	<b>Relevant Speeches</b>	<b>Sum</b>	<b>Total DQI</b>
Economy	33	15	83	<b>5.53</b>
Environment	36	15	66	<b>4.4</b>
Democratic institutions	32	9	61	<b>6.77</b>
Foreign Policy	30	14	73	<b>5.21</b>
<i>Total (includes opening and closing remarks)</i>	<i>148</i>	<i>53</i>	<i>274</i>	<i>5.16</i>

On the low end of the scale, one speech received a DQI score of 1 out of a possible 14. This was Justin Trudeau’s account of the environmental assessment process for oil pipeline projects:

...Canadians know that we need an actual approach that gets it, that restores that public trust that we have simply lost over the past years. Mr. Harper has failed on the environment, and therefore he’s failed on the economy. Mr. Mulcair continues to – to say different things in both languages. But I will say that, on Energy East, I have consistently said that it needs to gain social license. And the Conservatives in New Brunswick, you know, criticized me roundly when they were in government. So I don’t know what Mr. Harper’s talking about in terms of that.<sup>27</sup>

This statement demonstrates a lack of respect, reason-giving, justification, and a failure to address counterarguments. It also features inaccessible references to particular interests, given

<sup>27</sup> Justin Trudeau. “Maclean’s Federal Leaders’ Debate 2015,” *Maclean’s*. August 7, 2015. <http://www.macleans.ca/politics/ottawa/tale-of-the-tape-read-a-full-transcript-of-macleans-debate/>

that the Progressive Conservative government of New Brunswick was not previously a topic of discussion. It may also be unclear to viewers what Trudeau means by “social license,” in addition to the Liberal leader’s insufficient explanation for why this should be done.

Closing statements also tended to generate low DQI scores, likely due to the vague generalities employed in summary statements as opposed to addressing more concrete policy questions. Some closing statements were not deliberative at all. Although Thomas Mulcair’s closing statement was coded as a relevant speech, it received a score of just 2 out of 14:

...The biggest risk for Canada is four more years of Mr. Harper’s government. It is time for a change – change that’s built on hard work, living within your means, and accountability. These are the values that have guided by 35 years of public service, and these are the values that will continue to guide me. My number one priority is to kick-start the economy and get Canadians working. We will invest in local infrastructure and help small businesses to create jobs. And we understand that good jobs and a clean environment go hand-in-hand. I have fought for Canada my whole life. I know that Canada is the greatest country in the world. But a lot has been lost under the Conservatives. I have the experience to replace Mr. Harper, and the plan to repair the damage that he has done. Canadians are ready for change. We’re ready too. I invite you to join us. Thank you.<sup>28</sup>

This particular statement is replete with vague proposals and attacks, with very little justification. Conversely, an example of a high scoring speech, which scored 11 out of 14, is Elizabeth May’s plan for short term economic stimulus.

Excellent question. I think we have to also bear in mind and keep in context that the oil sands are about two percent of our GDP. We’ve got a lot of economic activity. The Prime Minister is right, we’re seeing other sectors begin to rebound and able to export. Our dollar shouldn’t keep declining — I think this is a source of worry — but we can’t just sit back and think that the current stagnant economy is going to fix itself. We need investment. We need investment from the public sector. We need to invest in a climate action plan. Frankly, we need an army of carpenters, electricians and contractors going out to plug leaky buildings. That’s 30 percent of carbon pollution comes from the energy we waste and the money we waste heating the outdoors in the winter and cooling it in the summer. And we also need to invest in municipal infrastructure. That infrastructure deficit is \$123 billion. We need to get at it as our bridges and roads are crumbling.<sup>29</sup>

May respects others: “The Prime Minister is right,” acknowledges counterarguments, neatly ties her justifications to her proposals, and keeps an entirely positive tone throughout the speech. Interestingly, there was little variation by theme in this debate, although discussion of the environment produced the lowest DQI scores at 4.4 and democratic institutions generated the highest at 6.7. This discrepancy is possibly due to the similarities between party positions on

<sup>28</sup> Thomas Mulcair. “Maclean’s Federal Leaders’ Debate 2015,” *Maclean’s*. August 7, 2015. <http://www.macleans.ca/politics/ottawa/tale-of-the-tape-read-a-full-transcript-of-macleans-debate/>

<sup>29</sup> Elizabeth May. “Maclean’s Federal Leaders’ Debate 2015,” *Maclean’s*. August 7, 2015. <http://www.macleans.ca/politics/ottawa/tale-of-the-tape-read-a-full-transcript-of-macleans-debate/>

many environmental issues versus the parties' distinct policy proposals and level of dissensus on an issue such as senate reform.

### *French debate*

In the French debate, there were 202 total speech units. Of these speeches, 104 contained demands. The total DQI for the French-language debate is 5.72. The French debate contained an additional theme, le gouvernement au service des Canadiens, and an additional participant, Gilles Duceppe. The French debate featured greater deliberation, in that 51% of all speeches contained demands and were thus coded as relevant, compared to 36% of English-language speeches. One of the highest DQI scores came from Justin Trudeau's defense of the niqab, partially outlined below:

... Ma position est très claire, vous la savez tous, vous la connaissez tous. Je crois que si un homme ne peut pas imposer sa volonté de, pour, comment une femme s'habille, on devrait pas avoir un état qui impose comment une femme devrait pas s'habiller. Je comprends que c'est un, une question qui met bien des gens mal à l'aise, mais pour moi, un État, l'État c'est là pour défendre les droits des minorités, défendre les droits des femmes.<sup>30</sup>

In this case, Trudeau cleanly defines the reasoning for his proposal to reverse an existing government position, while appealing to rights, values, and a desire to help the marginalized. He also acknowledges counterarguments and maintains a positive tone. Yet Trudeau also generated a rock bottom score of 1, when failing to provide any justification during a speech on F-35 fighter jets: "...On a un gouvernement qui continue de parler de nos forces armées, de vouloir utiliser les forces armées comme appui pour son agenda de peur et de sécurité, mais il ne lui donne pas les outils nécessaires. Nous proposons d'annuler les F-35, d'investir dans la marine canadienne et de s'occuper de nos anciens combattants comme eux ils n'ont pas fait depuis 10 ans."<sup>31</sup> The negativity and obfuscation in this response avoids both the question of why the F35s should be cancelled and why and how this money can be used for veterans.

In general, the party leaders produced uniformly low DQI scores (see tables 6 and 7). Stephen Harper generated the lowest overall ratings, with a 3.46 in the English debate and a 4.68 in the French debate. NDP leader Thomas Mulcair had the highest DQI scores: 6.18 in English and 6.36 in French, although even these readings are far from laudable on a 14-point scale. The leaders were generally consistent with their DQI scores in English and in French, with Thomas Mulcair being the most consistent. However, the similarities in DQI totals across the French and English debates masks a small yet significant linguistic effect. Indeed, Elizabeth May generated the highest DQI score of all leaders in the English debate at 7.1. Yet she brought down the French debate's overall DQI with a score of 4.3. This drop was masked by Gilles Duceppe's presence in the French debate. The Bloc Québécois leader produced a DQI score of 7.31. Given May's relatively strong performance in English, it is conceivable that linguistic discomfort affected her ability to express herself and sunk her DQI score. For example, May developed a very limited response, in terms of substance, justification, and tone on the issue of refugee

<sup>30</sup> Justin Trudeau. "Le grand débat 2015" *Radio Canada*. September 24, 2015. <http://ici.radio-canada.ca/elections-canada-2015/debat>

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

policy: “Monsieur Harper a fait les choses dans le changement des lois pour immigration et réfugiés qui rend le système absolument comme un cauchemar. C’est impossible d’aider les réfugiés maintenant. Au contraire dans le temps passé pour aider les peuples de Vietnam. On doit changer les lois et aussi garantir la sécurité.”<sup>32</sup> In this respect, poor second language skills may be viewed as impeding deliberation.

Table 3: French-language debate by theme

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Total Speeches</b>	<b>Relevant Speeches</b>	<b>Sum</b>	<b>Total DQI</b>
Economy	42	26	163	<b>6.26</b>
Environment	35	16	83	<b>5.18</b>
Democratic institutions	30	11	64	<b>5.18</b>
Foreign Policy	36	22	126	<b>5.72</b>
Government Services*	49	25	156	<b>6.24</b>
<i>Total (includes opening and closing remarks)</i>	<b>202</b>	<b>104</b>	<b>595</b>	<b>5.72</b>

\*The French language debate contained five themes while the English debate contained only four. Both debates were two hours in length.

Table 4. English vs. French debate

<b>Debate</b>	<b>Total speeches</b>	<b>Relevant Speeches (ratio)</b>	<b>Interruptions</b>	<b>Crosstalk*</b>	<b>DQI</b>
Maclean’s (English)	148	53 (36% relevant)	48	16	5.16
Radio Canada (French)	202	104 (51% relevant)	41	7	5.72

\*This dimension measures “crosstalk exchanges” rather than single back and forth instances of crosstalk. A crosstalk exchange occurs when party leaders talk over each other more than two consecutive times and the moderator must intervene.

Table 6: Deliberation by party leader (Maclean’s debate)

<b>Party leader</b>	<b>Total speeches</b>	<b>Relevant speeches</b>	<b>DQI</b>
Harper	47	13	<b>3.46</b>
May	31	11	<b>7.1</b>
Mulcair	34	16	<b>6.18</b>
Trudeau	24	12	<b>4.41</b>

<sup>32</sup> Elizabeth May. “Le grand débat 2015” *Radio Canada*. September 24, 2015. <http://ici.radio-canada.ca/elections-canada-2015/debat>

Table 7: Deliberation by party leader (Radio Canada debate)

<b>Party leader</b>	<b>Total speeches</b>	<b>Relevant speeches</b>	<b>DQI</b>
Duceppe	33	22	<b>7.31</b>
Harper	49	19	<b>4.68</b>
May	28	12	<b>4.3</b>
Mulcair	44	22	<b>6.36</b>
Trudeau	40	29	<b>5.58</b>

Table 8: Percentage of speeches within each indicator (Maclean's debate)

<b>Scale</b>	<i>Participation</i>	<i>Level of justification</i>	<i>Inclusiveness</i>	<i>Content</i>	<i>Counterarguments</i>	<i>Respect</i>
0	30% (interrupted)	18.8% (none)	43% (group)	56% (none)	35% (ignored)	16.9% (negative)
1	70% (normal participation)	35.8% (inferior)	37% (neutral)	30% (material interest/security)	37.7% (degraded)	69% (both/neither)
2	N/A	32% (qualified)	15% (utilitarian)	12.2% (rights/values)	24.5% (mentioned-neutral)	13.2% (positive)
3	N/A	13% (sophisticated)	3.7% (difference principle)	N/A	1.8% (valued)	N/A

n=53 \*percentages may not add to 100 due to rounding

Table 9: Percentage of speeches within each indicator (Radio Canada debate)

<b>Scale</b>	<i>Participation</i>	<i>Level of justification</i>	<i>Inclusiveness</i>	<i>Content</i>	<i>Counterarguments</i>	<i>Respect</i>
0	23% (interrupted)	22.1% (none)	16.3% (group)	26.9% (none)	49% (ignored)	11.5% (negative)
1	77% (normal participation)	46% (inferior)	44% (neutral)	56.6% (material interest/security)	37% (degraded)	79.8% (both/neither)
2	N/A	27.8% (qualified)	25.9% (utilitarian)	16.3% (rights/values)	13.4% (mentioned-neutral)	9.6% (positive)
3	N/A	4% (sophisticated)	13.4% (difference principle)	N/A	0% (valued)	N/A

n= 104 \*percentages may not add to 100 due to rounding

### *D. Interpretation of findings*

#### *Shortcomings of campaign debates?*

Figures eight and nine shed light on how and where poor discourse quality manifested itself in the leaders' debates. These tables highlight how few of the relevant speeches reached the highest indicators of discourse quality. Indeed, the DQI readings are middling to low in virtually all cases, despite marginal differences between issue areas and party leaders. What might explain these findings? First, the partisan dynamics of televised debates present a challenge for deliberation. In a high-stakes partisan event, it seems that leaders prioritize discrediting their opponents over appearing to be affable consensus builders. These tendencies are evidenced by the high level of interruptions and cross talk, as well as the low level of respect in these two debates. By contrast, public forums are not imbued with partisanship, and parliamentary debates are largely sheltered from large television audiences and high stakes political theatre of the leaders' debates.

Stephen Harper's low DQI ratings merit particular scrutiny. It may be difficult for an incumbent with a long tenure in office to demand new policy directions, rather than defending the status quo, framing their track record, and staving off attacks from multiple opponents. Indeed, Harper's rate of relevant speeches is very low. 28 percent of all Harper speeches were demand-relevant in the English debate, as well as 38 percent in the French debate, versus Mulcair's respective ratios of 44 and 50 percent.

Similarly, the English debate in particular registered a low rate of deliberation (only 36% of all speeches), partially due to the fact that a significant portion of the debate was spent arguing over the details of the past, as well as present economic conditions, for example, whether Canada is currently in a recession. Such discussions are not deliberative, at least not according to Steenbergen et al.'s DQI. In their estimation, deliberation is necessarily future-oriented and requires putting forth and defending claims about what should be done. At the same time, leaders must be held accountable for past actions,<sup>33</sup> and the DQI does not permit measurement of this important function.

Election debates may also be faulted for their exclusivity. Some scholars argue that true deliberation is not possible without a diversity of viewpoints and experiences. For instance, since party leaders' are usually privileged, well-educated lawyers and businessmen, they will necessarily set the debate agenda to exclude certain voices, in concert with media elites.<sup>34</sup>

#### *Shortcomings of the Discourse Quality Index?*

The debates themselves are not entirely at fault for low DQI scores. The appropriateness of the index for measuring discourse quality in a campaign debate format must also be

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<sup>33</sup> See Morris Fiorina. 1981. *Retrospective Voting in American National Elections*. (New Haven: Yale University Press); Eric M. Uslaner. 1989. "Looking Forward and Looking Backward: Prospective and Retrospective Voting in the 1980 Federal Election in Canada." *British Journal of Political Science* 19 (4), pp. 495-513; Fred Cutler. 2004. "Government Responsibility and Electoral Accountability in Federations" *Publius* 34 (2), pp. 19-38.

<sup>34</sup> For a critical assessment of elite-driven deliberation, see Lynn Sanders. 1997. "Against Deliberation," *Political Theory* 25 (3), pp. 347-376.

questioned. One important limitation is the lack of any category for level of detail on how a given plan can be achieved. For example, many of these proposals focused on the “how” something could be done, rather than the “why.” The latter is captured by the level of justification indicator, but an additional dimension worth capturing is the level of coherent elaboration of the necessary steps for achieving a given demand. It is possible to have a high level of justification without detailing this justification.

Furthermore, the counterargument indicators proved problematic in this analysis. In certain cases, such as capturing money from offshore tax havens, it is difficult to acknowledge a different viewpoint, since no mainstream position or figure advocates against recuperating this money. However, such instances are still coded as “counterarguments ignored.” In other words, sometimes counterarguments are not applicable.

Conversely, one limitation which may inflate DQI scores is the lack of any ability to account for previous speech content. More specifically, a given speech which yields high discourse quality could potentially be repeated multiple times. Each time it would yield a high DQI score, when in fact it would be more logical to factor in repetitive statements and lower DQI scores accordingly.

A final limitation with the DQI in the context of televised debates involves time restrictions. The deliberative exercise is biased by the amount of time allotted to speakers. With insufficient time, speakers cannot sufficiently justify claims or appeal to the common good. When moderators allot speaking time in 30, 15, or even 5 second chunks,<sup>35</sup> debates do not permit the ideal time for quality discourse, as measured by the DQI.

For this reason, a more appropriate measure of discourse quality in election debates may be Deliberative Transformative Moments (DTM). This concept, developed by Jaramillo and Steiner (2014), amends the DQI to account for “small group discussions that are often characterized with quick gives-and-takes with many shortcuts.” Although the authors apply the DTM index to personal storytelling for ex-Colombian militants,<sup>36</sup> it would function well in a debate setting. “We use personal stories as an illustration of a mechanism to trigger Deliberative Transformative Moments (DTM). We chose this focus because personal stories have gained increased attention in the deliberative literature and...we have found quite many situations where personal stories triggered (DTM).”<sup>37</sup> DTM accounts for not just the speech itself, but the context in which it is uttered. The basic concept of DTM is that speech follows a trajectory, and discourse can move upward, downward, or continuously in terms of quality. In this respect, shortcuts and quick exchanges which are common in small group discussions are not penalized in terms of their discourse quality readings, if they conform to an already established level of deliberation. While the DQI had to first be applied to televised leaders’ debates to determine

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<sup>35</sup> This was common practice in the French debate, with five candidates and five topics to cover.

<sup>36</sup> Maria Clara Jaramillo and Jurg Steiner. 2014. “Deliberative Transformative Moments: A New Concept as Amendment to the Discourse Quality Index,” *Journal of Public Deliberation* 10 (2). In this respect, Jaramillo and Steiner endorse storytelling as an alternative view of deliberation, similar to Sanders’ (1997) use of the concept of “testimony.”

<sup>37</sup> Maria Clara Jaramillo and Jurg Steiner. 2014. “Deliberative Transformative Moments: A New Concept as Amendment to the Discourse Quality Index,” *Journal of Public Deliberation* 10 (2). p. 6.

these shortcomings, future research which includes DTM logic would produce more reliable indicators of discourse quality.

Similarly, the subjective nature of the DQI should also be noted, at the stage of determining relevant speeches and during the coding process. For example, on the economy, Stephen Harper claimed that, "...our view is, you know, we're going to have growth this year, we're going to have growth going forward. The way you deal with this is by sticking with a plan that is working, a low-tax, prudent plan that is working rather than go to a plan of high taxes and high debt and high deficits, which is failing – which is failing everywhere else."<sup>38</sup> It is not immediately clear whether this an implicit demand or whether no demand has been made. Both answers are reasonable, which presents a problem for objectivity when many of these contentions are aggregated. As Martin King argues, researchers must not mistake subjective ideas and feelings for objective facts about discourse.<sup>39</sup> To the extent that the DQI yields reliable and objective measures, it can be used to draw conclusions about discourse quality across a variety of mediums. Practices such as extensive note taking to justify coding choices as well as intercoder reliability help to meet these standards. Yet even if the DQI has problematic features, its wide usage suggests it is worth exploring in a variety of contexts for potential deliberation.

### *Conclusion*

Ultimately, discussion of why certain policies should be pursued were rare in both English and French leaders' debates. Further, there was a surprising amount of "inside baseball" on items such as the Clarity Act in the English debate and supply management in the French debate. Thus, in many respects, the most widely accessed instance of potential deliberation in Canadian society yields consistently poor discourse quality. Election debates may hold potential as instruments for enhancing democratic discourse and political awareness. Yet squabbling over different versions of the past, rather than proposing, evaluating, and defending policy choices may lead citizens to tune out of politics. These findings would support potential changes in debate formats, more specifically, the lengthening of time allotments, sanctioning of interruptions, and requiring moderators to ask questions which are explicitly future-oriented. Moreover, holding a relatively small number of debates may impede deliberation by raising the stakes for participants hoping to land decisive blows on their opponents.

This paper has found that Canadian federal leaders' debates do not fare well when measured by a modified version of Steenbergen et al.'s Discourse Quality Index. Poor discourse quality proliferates across issue areas and party leaders, although Stephen Harper's speeches contain the lowest overall DQI scores and Thomas Mulcair's speeches produce the highest ratings. Moreover, Elizabeth May's three-point DQI drop from the English to French debate suggests that language barriers can inhibit sophisticated discourse quality. This analysis has also suggested preliminary explanations for low discourse results. The first key factor consists of the limited respect amongst adversarial leaders enabled by a platform which encourages an especially confrontational partisanship. The second factor consists of deliberative roadblocks inherent in a debate format, which include oratorical shortcuts, moderator role, time restrictions,

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<sup>38</sup> Stephen Harper. "Maclean's Federal Leaders' Debate 2015," *Maclean's*. August 7, 2015. <http://www.macleans.ca/politics/ottawa/tale-of-the-tape-read-a-full-transcript-of-macleans-debate/>

<sup>39</sup> Martin King. 2009. "A critical assessment of Steenbergen et al's Discourse Quality Index," *Roundhouse: A Journal of Critical Theory and Practice* 1 (1). ISSN 2042-3438 (Online) <http://roundhouse.leeds.ac.uk/files/2009/10/Martin-King.pdf>

and back-and-forth exchanges. The final factor which produces low DQI scores is shortcomings with the DQI itself when applied to the debate context, including a failure to account for key dimensions of political discourse and concerns with subjectivity. Accordingly, future assessments of discourse quality in televised election debates should account for these factors to the greatest extent possible. A useful first step would include the integration of logic found in the Deliberative Transformative Moments index.

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