Televised Election Debates in a Deliberative System
The Role of Framing and Emotions

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Abstract: Are televised election debates (TEDs) a blessing for democracy, educating citizens and informing them of their electoral options? Or should they be viewed as a curse, presenting superficial, manipulating rhetoric in one-way communication? In this article, I evaluate TEDs from a deliberative point of view, focusing on the potential positive and negative outcomes of framing by politicians, as well as on the pros and cons of displaying emotions in debates. I argue that the use of these two rhetorical devices in TEDs is potentially helpful in inspiring deliberation, perspective-taking and subsequent reflection in both politicians and voters. This leads me to conclude that televised election debates should be critically approached as communicative venues with potential deliberative qualities.

Keywords: communication, deliberation, election debates, reflection, rhetoric

Political discourse in general, and election debates specifically, face critique (Coleman 2020; Marien et al. 2020). Often-heard remarks include that these debates are just for show, have limited substance, and only consist of politicians trying to bash each other and "score points" with hollow phrases and simplifications (ADRWG 2015; Coleman 2000; Walzer 2007; Zarefsky 1992). These critiques raise several doubts about the merits of televised election debates (TEDs). In a healthy electoral democratic system, actively engaged, informed citizens make reasoned choices and subsequently voice their opinions by means of voting and possibly other forms of participation (e.g., Leeper and Slothuus 2018). If debates were just for show and aimed at getting the most attention, rather than informing and enabling the voter to make reasoned choices, would they still be beneficial for representative democracy? One could argue TEDs do more harm than good, leading people to not take politics seriously, doubting representation, and consequently tuning out and not turning

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out to vote. Contrastingly, the opposite may also be true. When debates are more “entertaining” and spike more interest, this could lead to more people watching, more people getting information, and, thereby, more informed citizens.

In this article, I explore the pros and cons of TEDs by looking at these debates through a “deliberative lens,” following other scholars who have used deliberative theory and measures to assess the quality of political debates (Coleman 2013, 2020; Davidson et al. 2017; Lord and Tamvaki 2013; Marien et al. 2020; Wyss et al. 2015). TEDs have flaws and can be problematic, notably through the manipulative use of rhetoric. Nonetheless, they should not be disregarded too quickly. These debates have a place and democratic role in a deliberative system, contributing to a more educated, informed public (Coleman 2020; Davidson et al. 2017).

Numerous deliberative scholars have theorized against a sole normative focus on the value of *ratio* alone and propose that we need more than reason to foster a reflective citizenry (e.g., Bächtiger and Parkinson 2019). Building on that, I argue that the rhetorical tools used in debates can have potential benefits. They can play a constructive role in spiking reflection and engagement, making politics more accessible, inclusive, and diverse. This adds to the idea that TEDs should not be dismissed too easily. Rather, it is important to think about how TEDs can help representative democracy, to what standards we should hold them, and how they can be improved. Therefore, we should establish theoretically if, and how, TEDs could benefit the functioning of democracy and investigate empirically if, and how, they can live up to their potential. In this article, I do not approach these debates as a conversation among politicians, but I choose to focus instead on what is happening between politicians and voters. As such, I see the discussion between the politicians as a tool: a way for politicians and voters to engage in a form of distanced, sometimes asynchronous but still mutual communication.

After reviewing the characteristics and hypothesized effects of TEDs in literature, I further elaborate on how previous scholars have used a deliberative lens to consider the potential of TEDs to spur reflective reasoning and “deliberation within.” Following this deliberative approach to TEDs, I closely examine two rhetorical devices in televised election debates. This results in two contributions to the literature. First, I expand on the potential of framing in TEDs to be more than manipulation. On the one hand, framing raises concerns because of its potential to highlight one single view of an issue, presenting a slanted view of reality. On the other hand, frames could also possess the ability to provide new perspectives on issues, which can enable more reflection in voters. Second, I approach the use of emotional appeals in TEDs in a similar manner.

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Politicians in debates often go beyond reason, attach emotion to issues, and attempt to evoke affective responses in the public. This raises doubts about the manipulative potential of emotions but can also enable people to care more about politics and policy issues, making politics more accessible and relatable to voters' own lives.

Televised Election Debates

Contrary to what many people think, the election debate between US presidential candidates Kennedy and Nixon in 1960 was not the first to be broadcasted on television. Four years earlier, in 1956, Republican Senator Margaret Chase Smith faced former First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt in the CBS show *Face the Nation,* as respective surrogates for sitting President Eisenhower and his democratic challenger, Adlai Stevenson. Not only was this one of the first televised election debates ever (if not *the* first), but it was also the first time a woman was featured on *Face the Nation* (Senate Historical Office 2022). It is striking to note that already in the 1956 debate between Smith and Roosevelt, tone and respectfulness were important features of the dialogue. It was not just about *what* was being said but also about *how* it was said:

> As planned, Smith remained poised and taciturn, a strategy that allowed the more talkative Roosevelt to dominate—until the closing statements. Then, Smith offered a forceful, concise argument that touched on many key issues. "What was surprising" about the final statement "was my abrupt change in delivery," Smith recalled. "It was not the soft, restrained, measured delivery" of the debate; rather, "it was a biting staccato." This change in demeanor unnerved and angered Eleanor Roosevelt, who refused to shake hands after the debate. (Senate Historical Office 2022)

Since then, public election debates have become common in many countries in the run-up to national, and in some instances subnational, elections (Anstead 2016; Debates International 2020; NDI 2021). The scholarly and public attention paid to how politicians make their statements in these debates and what effects that might have has not diminished—quite the contrary (Bossetta 2017; Budzyńska-Daca and Botwina 2015; Harris 2020; Heaney 2020; Kellman 2018; Marien et al. 2020; Marietta 2009; Morris and Johnson 2011; Simon-Vandenbergen 2008).

Debates usually include two or more politicians, often party leaders or at least prominent party members, who engage in a discussion about several policy-related subjects. This discussion is normally guided by one

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or more moderators, who ask questions and try to make sure that everyone has approximately equal opportunity to engage. Besides, the politicians may have to react to prepared statements or to audience questions. TED formats can vary, depending on the broadcaster and electoral system. Sometimes it is a one-on-one face-off between leaders of the biggest (or only) two parties, sometimes there are multiple debate participants from three or more parties.

TEDs provide an additional information source for voters, besides speeches, webpages, advertisements, and other more unidimensional sources. Debates differ from these other information types because of their confrontational format: "opposing candidates on the same stage alternating turns at talk—itself generates interest" (Benoit 2014: 4). William Benoit (2014) stresses the importance of the "clash" between candidates, referring not just to the attack but also to the response to that attack. The opportunity for response and follow-up questions heightens the contrast between candidates: "Candidates have a chance to present their views and respond to opponents in debates and voters learn about the candidates' policy and character from debates, news about debates, and political discussion on debates" (2014: 3).

Looking at debates helps voters learn more about different policy positions, which subsequently helps them make more informed choices (Aalberg and Jenssen 2007; Van der Meer et al. 2016). For instance, Jaeho Cho and Syng Pom Choy (2011) find that debate viewing is positively related to news consumption and political conversation, which can create a more informed electorate. In their meta-analysis of the effects of watching election debates, Benoit and colleagues (2003) also find that watching debates can increase issue salience, issue knowledge, and perceived importance of issues. They show how this can, in turn, change voters' preferences and perceptions of candidate personality, thereby potentially influencing vote choice.

Despite these positive effects, some characteristics of television debates arguably do more harm than good. Criticizing opponents is prevalent in televised debates and often turns into uncivil "bashing" with personal attacks and frequent interruptions. The focus on attacking the opponent could be problematic since it can undermine the potential informative function of debates (Marien et al. 2020; Popan et al. 2019). Furthermore, Michael Walzer points to the problem of using rhetoric in debates: "a debate is a contest between verbal athletes, and the aim is victory. The means are the exercise of rhetorical skill, the mustering of favourable evidence (and the suppression of unfavourable evidence), the discrediting of other debaters, the appeal to authority or celebrity, and so on" (2007: 137–138). David Zarefsky (1992) has argued debates are in theory

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great for identifying issues and focusing the attention of the audience but that they do not work out in practice. He says this is specifically because these debates are formatted for television, which aims at confrontation, and adds drama and conflict, which hinder proper discussion and stimulate the use of one-liners, condemning precisely the "confrontational format" Benoit (2014) praises.

In previous research, the focus mostly lies on the content and effects of debate between politicians, with researchers mapping the strategic choices politicians make to persuade an audience and "win" the debate (Benoit 2014; Benoit and Harthcock 1999; Carlin et al. 2001; Morris and Johnson 2011). In this article, I do not look at debates as discussions between only politicians among themselves and the effects in the public of looking at such a discussion. Instead, I shift direction, following insights gleaned from studies on deliberation within (Davidson et al. 2017; Goodin 2000) and pragma-dialectics (Eemeren and Grootendorst 2004).

Voters are the ones that politicians arguably intend to inform and persuade during TEDs. The politicians are not truly attempting to convey their message to each other, since they are usually quite aware of their opponent's standpoints. Their communication is directed at voters, who follow the debate through their screen. Therefore, I choose to view TEDs as a communicative exchange between politicians and their target audience of intended voters. In this view, the debate between politicians is used as a venue to facilitate communication between politician and citizens. A natural discussion is mimicked, while the participants in the debate are communicating not with each other but primarily with those watching the debate from their homes. Still, as I will elaborate, this is not just about politicians sending their message to voters from a television studio. TEDs entail an internally reflective conversation, taking place both in the heads of politicians and in the heads of voters.

Debates through a Deliberative Lens

Televised election debates take the form of a discussion; they are instances of communication in which multiple opinions are presented. I build on the work of scholars who have previously used a deliberative lens when studying TEDs (e.g., Cho and Choy 2011; Coleman 2013, 2020; Davidson et al. 2017; Hughes 2019; Marien et al. 2020). This means that I use deliberative ideals to think about and examine this communicative genre.

Deliberative democracy "puts meaningful communication at the heart of democracy, not as a naive hope, but in full recognition of the real capacities and limitations of citizens, politicians, and political processes"

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(Bächtiger et al. 2018b). Although deliberative democracy is certainly not the only approach to democracy (see, e.g., Strömbäck 2005), it is the framework that takes communication at its core and attaches importance to the relationship and tensions between reason and rhetoric for the functioning of democracy (Bächtiger and Parkinson 2019; Chambers 2009; Coleman 2020; Dryzek 2010).

Following André Bächtinger and John Parkinson (2019: 23), I adopt Jane Mansbridge's (2015: 27) definition of deliberation, which highlights the importance of reflection and interaction: "I suggest defining deliberation in the public sphere minimally and broadly as mutual communication that involves weighing and reflecting on preferences, values, and interests regarding matters of common concern. Communications or communicative processes that include little or no interaction and reflective weighing are not by itself deliberation." This definition is particularly suited for the aim of this article: to pinpoint the deficiencies and advantages of TEDs.

My aim is not to look for an ideal deliberative situation in election debates, which is an unrealistic expectation of an inherently argumentative genre. Instead, I examine the desirable and undesirable functions TEDs could have in a "deliberative system" (Coleman 2020; Davidson et al. 2017). The systemic approach to deliberation emphasizes that democracies consist of many different, interconnected cogs and levers. The different elements of the system have their separate democratic merits and functions and together form a complex whole. Central in this system is a talk-based approach to problem-solving and conflict. It is important to look at the deliberative quality of both the whole and of its separate venues and institutions (Bächtiger et al. 2018b; Parkinson and Mansbridge 2012; Schmitt-Beck and Grill 2020). Although there is a shared deliberative standard, norms can be tailored to the specific context and real-world situation: "even deliberative deficiencies can be justified on deliberative grounds if the particular deficiency in one venue helps advance the deliberative quality of the system as a whole" (Bächtiger et al. 2018b: 16).

In particular, I want to examine one specific desirable function TEDs can have in a deliberative system: spurring reflection among citizens. The importance of a reflective citizenry has been pointed out previously by several deliberative scholars (Chambers 2003; Goodin 2000; Muradova 2020). Thomas Leeper and Rune Slothuus (2018: 3), for example, state, "although citizens come into deliberation with political positions and explanations, they are expected to hear alternative arguments presented by others and update their own viewpoints in response," emphasizing the democratic ideal of reflective citizens. Robert Goodin and Simon Niemeyer (2003) explain how making decision processes more reflective is the main

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point of deliberation, and Kevin Arcenaux and Ryan Vander Wielen (2017) have shown how reflection has the potential to cause a decline in affective polarization and lessen motivated reasoning. There is, in short, a certain interaction that is necessary for the process of becoming more reflective. Lala Muradova (2020: 26), for example, shows how interactions in deliberation can lead to perspective-taking, which spurs reflection. She argues, "Under the right conditions, deliberation produces more reflection when citizens make judgments by inducing the process of perspective-taking—*actively imagining others' experiences, perspectives and feelings*—in citizen deliberators" (original emphasis). Deliberative interactions thus have the potential to create more reflective citizens, who make arguably better, more thought-through decisions. Do TEDs have this reflective potential and can we therefore view them as deliberative interactions?

Appraisal of Televised Election Debates

The tension between spectacle and reflection that arises when talking about TEDs from a deliberative point of view is discussed in detail by Stephen Coleman (2020). He explains how the deliberative, Habermasian critique of TV in general can be extended to the specific venue of televised debates. Television as a mass medium is seen by some as a beneficial democratic instrument, which brings politicians closer to the people, makes politics more accessible and inclusive, and serves an educative, informative function. Sceptics, however, point to the fact that TVs have no filter, causing voters to be easily exposed to manipulation. Besides that, watching politics on television in bite-sized chunks might enable a passive audience that does not have to think for itself. This general deliberative disdain for politics as showbusiness translates in attitudes toward TEDs specifically.

Debates are often viewed as important democratic events (e.g., Benoit et al. 2003; Juárez-Gámiz et al. 2020; McKinney and Carlin 2004). Still, some see televised debates as an invitation to "arrive at superficial judgements on the basis of strategic, often seductive performances designed for manufactured audiences, who are vulnerable to slickly delivered misinformation" (Coleman 2020: 8). Coleman himself, however, argues spectacle and reflection should not be seen as irreconcilable opposites and that there might be democratic value in bringing them together. Finding an ideal deliberative situation in debates is not a realistic expectation, but when we view debates as part of a deliberative system, they do show valuable deliberative potential.

This potential primarily lies in the capability of TEDs to both give a platform to rich and reasoned argumentation about policy, as well as

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hold the audience's attention through a certain level of dramatization. The latter, Coleman relates to Simone Chambers's (2009) "deliberative rhetoric," which concerns speech that goes further than eloquent and truthful statements, by creating a dynamic relationship between speaker and hearer and sparks active reasoning and thoughtfulness. In a debate, politicians synchronously present their perspective and worldviews, which citizens can reflect on and reason with. The democratic objective of TEDs, so Coleman (2020) concludes, should be to create both spectacle and reflection, while not losing sight of the normative value of each.

A more critical stance on TEDs is taken by Ceri Hughes (2019), who questions the presentation of televised leader's debates in the United Kingdom as deliberative events. Arguing from content analysis of debates based on the Discourse Quality Index (DQI) (Steenbergen et al. 2003), a measure of deliberative quality of discourse, he concludes that existing power dynamics and disparities were reinforced rather than balanced out. Even though politicians representing smaller parties were present in the debate, not everyone was given equal opportunity to disperse their views, and party-status played a considerable role. This is—according to Hughes—counter to the deliberative ideal of equal participation and consideration of all points of view.

Similarly, Stewart Davidson and colleagues (2017: 186) use the DQI to assess both UK leader's debates and parliamentary debates. Initially, they find the discourse quality in the leader's debates a fairly weak reflection of deliberative ideals. However, they propose a deliberative systems approach in which TEDs are part of a larger deliberative sequence of events and therefore do not need to "pass every deliberative test with flying colours as their inevitable limitations can be offset by other components of that system." From this point of view, they contend that the debates have a valuable role to play in a deliberative system, since they have an educative function and are an important channel for mass communication of reasons. To enhance this educative function, Davidson and colleagues recommend sequencing TEDs with deliberative polls, mini-publics, or deliberation days. Like Coleman (2020), Davidson et al. (2017) also praise the ability of TEDs to facilitate internal reflection on the side of voters. Especially when sequenced, they state, TEDs could advance "deliberation within" in the electorate.

Televised Election Debates Spurring Deliberation Within

The concept of deliberation within was first introduced by Robert Goodin (2000), who argues that since deliberation consists of weighing reasons for and against, it "can and ultimately must take place within the head of each individual." It is therefore important to look at not only the

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external-collective aspect of deliberation (discussing reasons with others) but also the internal-reflective side (deliberating reasons in your head). Through deliberation within, Goodin states, everyone can be linked to everyone "in a dialogue stretching across the entire community" (2000: 87). In this process, one person takes different perspectives at the same time, which causes more understanding of both the self and the world of others.

TEDs have been argued to foster deliberation within on the side of voters, making them think reflectively (Davidson et al. 2017). Moreover, deliberation within has also been suggested as a solution for the fact that it is impossible for politicians to deliberate face-to-face with the entire electorate, let alone within the span of one campaign period (Goodin 2000). TEDs could potentially also be a venue where politicians deliberate internally. Multiple standpoints can be part of the discussion because of the other politician(s) in the debate and sometimes (depending on the format) via the moderator or audience questions.

In TEDs, not all voters can be present to externally deliberate with their representatives. What arguably *is* possible is having the public's opinion represented in the debate. To have proper representation of, and engagement with, voter opinions, politicians can engage in what pragma-dialecticians call an "implicit critical discussion" (Eemeren et al. 2002: 28, 29; Eemeren and Grootendorst 2015: 714), a concept quite similar and related to deliberation within.[1]

In an implicit discussion, only one of the "sides" of a conversation actively participates and voices their arguments. Still, even without the explicit participation of the other side, opposing views are considered in the discussion, like when a politician explicitly refers to criticisms a voter (real or imagined) might have (Eemeren et al. Hekemans 2002: 28, 29). For politicians to present effective arguments to sway the voters to their side, they need to properly consider any reasons the voter might have for doubting them. It is thus important that politicians actively anticipate the doubts, resistance, and counterarguments of voters in an internal, reflective dialogue, so they can provide more diverse justifications for their standpoints and counterarguments. More diverse reasoning would then potentially spur more internal reflection on the side of voters, who can on their end engage in imagined internal deliberation with politicians as well.

Still, Goodin (2000) contends, the "conversation with ourselves" should be a supplement to rather than a substitute for external-collective deliberative processes. It is a useful tool to face deliberative challenges, but still, no one can imagine someone else's interests, position, and perspective quite as richly as that person experiences them. Politicians can try to depict what their prospective voters think about increasing taxes,

for example, but it is quite difficult to try and cater to the diversity in opinions of all voters on this subject, from a multimillionaire to someone living from paycheck to paycheck. That is where the debate format of TEDs—with a moderator, audience questions, and several politicians from different sides present on stage—proves quite useful.

In sum, deliberation within could help move a large part of the deliberative task of considering potential doubts and counterarguments to people's mind. This way, voters would be "imaginatively present" in the minds of the politicians and vice versa. This is still no absolute interaction: citizens do not literally engage in a conversation with a politician about their values and ideas. The election debate is more of a distal, sometimes asynchronous, and arguably "virtual" interaction in which a variety of viewpoints are considered and addressed. That way, it is driven a bit further away from being mere show and brought a bit closer to a deliberative, reflection-spurring exchange. These reflections, however, ideally need to be unsoiled by manipulation. In what follows, I illustrate the double-edged sword that election debates offer for representation by discussing how the rhetorical devices used in these debates not only could be used to manipulate but may actually have some desirable results. I first scrutinize the concept of framing in debates and subsequently map the pros and cons of emotions in creating a reflective citizenry.

A Perspective on Rhetorical Devices in Televised Election Debates

Election debates can be useful to inform people about the different policy standpoints politicians have, and about how these standpoints differ and match the perspectives of different voters. However, politicians do not take part in debates just to inform the public. Probably more important to them is to persuade potential voters to vote for their party. This means that politicians think strategically about the way they present their arguments and try to persuade people that their standpoint is the best one (Bächtiger et al. 2018b). Debates can, therefore, be said to have a dual function: to inform and to persuade.

In their persuasive attempts, politicians often use rhetoric: the art of persuasion through communication (Martin 2014). Rhetoric is classically divided in appeals to *ethos* (character or virtue of the speaker), *pathos* (emotion) and *logos* (reason) in a way that is tailored to the specific audience (Dryzek 2010). An additional important feature is *kairos,* which entails the appropriateness of rhetorical devices, especially in relation to using them at the right time (Kinneavy and Eskin 2000; Martin 2015). Furthermore,

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rhetoric can also involve "vivid metaphors, creative interpretation of evidence, arresting figures of speech, irony, humour, exaggeration, gestures, performance, and dramaturgy" (Dryzek 2010: 320).

Rhetoric is often critiqued as a tool to manipulate voters in political discourse, and election debates are no exception (Coleman 2020). A sitting prime minister or president may refer to their experience as merit over a less seasoned opponent, thus employing ethos, instead of focusing on pointing out the merits of their own policy. Pathos is also used rather often, when politicians tell personal stories about hardships they experienced in their youth, or when they refer to their own kids and their futures, trying to invoke emotion in their audience. These can be honest attempts by the politicians to convey a story but can also be seen as tricks to persuade the audience. This might interfere with the audience's reflective capacities. When the public is manipulated through rhetoric, not all standpoints and arguments in the debate can be weighed equally, since the audience is being nudged in favor of or against one side of an issue. It is not fair weighing if the scale has been messed with.

Be that as it may, because of the dual function of debates and the nature of politics, eliminating rhetoric completely is unrealistic, let alone desirable. As stated by Iris Young (2000: 66): "while it is appropriate to distinguish between communicative acts that aim to further understanding and cooperation and those that operate strategically as means of using others for one's own end, this distinction cannot be made by means of a distinction between purely rational and merely rhetorical speech." This sentiment is also echoed in Chambers's "deliberative rhetoric," which makes people see things in new ways, provides knowledge, and enables reflection. Chambers writes: "if rhetoric in general is the study of how speech affects an audience then deliberative rhetoric must be about the way speech induces deliberation in the sense of inducing considered reflection" (2009: 335). In what follows, I discuss the manipulative and deliberative potential of two rhetorical tools, which are often used in election debates: framing and emotional appeals. I present several examples to illustrate the use of both framing and emotions in TEDs. Since the research I build on is largely situated in Western Europe and North America, and because of language-related feasibility, these examples are selected from several countries in the Global North, including multiparty and biparty systems and different governing structures.

Framing in Televised Election Debates

Framing, in the classic definition of Robert Entman, involves "selecting some aspects of a perceived reality and making them more salient in a

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communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described" (1993: 53). Framing is a specific form of rhetoric, involving an attempt to persuade by giving a particular perspective on an issue, deliberately not considering another perspective, or considering it less. In TEDs, politicians can use framing to highlight certain perspectives on a standpoint, thereby putting other parts they want to be less salient in the shadow.

For instance, sitting Prime Minister of New Zealand Jacinda Ardern faced challenger Judith Collins in October 2020. When asked to put a number on the amount of people that would be allowed to enter the country, given a shortage in housing, Ardern replies: "I'm not going to give you a number, but what I am going to say is that we can use immigration as a way to stimulate our economy, we need to bring in skilled people and we need to keep fulfilling our refugee obligations" (1News 2020). Ardern uses framing in (at least) two ways here. First, she connects immigration to the economy, giving a positive spin to immigration and presenting it as an opportunity for the country. Second, Ardern talks about New Zealand's "refugee obligation," framing the taking up of refugees as something of a duty that must be done without any doubt or discussion. This way, she steers clear of presenting the taking up of refugees as a choice or something charitable about which discussion is possible.

Since not all arguments and perspectives of an issue are voiced equally through framing, framing arguably has adverse effects on citizens reflective capacities because it threatens the ideal of considering all relevant arguments. The way frames can compromise deliberation has been elaborated on by Aubin Calvert and Mark Warren (2014). Frames are powerful tools of talk-based influence and can temper with desirable deliberation effects by making some reasons and arguments more prominent at the cost of others, limiting the range and depth of considerations and perspectives used in the reasoning process. They influence the way claims are presented and received, hampering proper reflection based on all relevant information. Still, framing is also inevitable in politics. Frames help us think: they provide people with cognitive structures that help them make sense of issues, form their own preferences, and discuss topics with others. Besides, in many democratic institutions and contexts such campaigns and media appearances, communication is often poured into a competitive mold, encouraging the use of frames.

Calvert and Warren (2014) advocate for separating the generic, inevitable functions of framing from specific problematic forms such as dominant or polarizing frames. Institutions, they contend, should attempt to counter the anti-deliberative effect of problematic frames by

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focusing on cross-cutting conversations and offering multiple contrasting frames. They specifically spotlight mini-publics as institutions with a suitable toolbox for dealing with problematic frames and elaborate in detail about the specific challenge and chances the design characteristics of mini-publics provide.

Even for the more competitively structured genre of TEDs, there is no need to throw out the baby with the bathwater. We can think of ways to combat the occurrence of problematic frames without invalidating frames altogether. Considerations include focusing on ways to accentuate multiple contrasting frames by having multiple politicians participating and giving everyone sufficient speaking time, and a well thought-through set of subjects and leading questions, to highlight a diversity of topics and groups advocated for. Accordingly, it is important to consider the role and power of the debate moderator as the facilitator of the discussion. Moderators can intervene when politicians talk past or over each other, they can enable equal speaking time in the conversation and make sure politicians stick to the topic when they try to deflect. Still, it is also important that moderators do not overstep their boundaries and insert themselves in the debate too much (ADRWG 2015).

An example of how TEDs can show contrasting frames by having politicians advocate and discuss their view at the same moment can be found in the debate of October 2020 between US vice presidential candidates Kamala Harris (Democrat) and Mike Pence (Republican). When talking about abortion, Harris asserts: “I will always fight for a woman’s right to make a decision about her own body, it should be her decision and not that of Donald Trump and Vice President Mike Pence” (USA Today 2020). Harris approaches the issue from the right-to-choose perspective, focusing on women’s self-determination over their bodies. Contrastingly, Pence declares: “I couldn’t be more proud to serve as vice president to a president who stands without apology for the sanctity of human life” (USA Today 2020). Pence adopts a pro-life stance, focusing not on the rights of pregnant people but on the life of the fetus and the value he believes should be attached to that life. This juxtaposition of two very different ways of looking at the topic of abortion provide viewers with two reasoning mechanisms to consider and relate to their own values and situation.

In their account of deliberation and framing, Leeper and Slothuus (2018) understand framing in a political context as a communicator’s selective presentation and interpretation of political realities. They mention that framing can be used as an active attempt to influence citizens for the often-selfish purpose of electoral success. The negative aspects of framing should not only be attributed to the politicians using these

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frames, Leeper and Slothuus argue. Citizens themselves can also be argued to play a role in this, showcasing two contradictory problems: citizens who do not listen to alternative perspectives presented in frames at all, and citizens who listen a bit too well (Leeper and Slothuus 2018). First, the effects of framing show that citizens are swayed quite easily from one opinion to the other, indicating that citizens' preferences are not very coherent or strong and hence that citizens are open to competing arguments or frames. Contrastingly, citizens sometimes also show rather limited responsiveness to frames, very much sticking to their preexisting opinions, or "frames in thought." These ideas might have been shaped by elite frames in the first place, but once formed, they limit the openness to arguments and frames citizens might later encounter (Leeper and Slothuus 2018; Slothuus and De Vreese 2010).

On the one hand, it is problematic when citizens are too easily swayed by frames, bend any way the wind blows, and are persuaded effortlessly. On the other hand, it is also problematic when citizens are too closed off to other ideas and only hold on to their preexisting beliefs without considering other ideas (Colombo 2018; Druckman et al. 2018; Leeper and Slothuus 2018). In both cases, the format of election debates might prove helpful. Leeper and Slothuus (2018) say multiple frames can help bypass these issues, which is the case in election debates. Having multiple politicians in a debate also implies multiple frames and thus multiple perspectives. The benefits of multiple, conflicting frames have also been theorized by Dennis Chong and James Druckman (2007), and Druckman and Kjersten Nelson (2003) have empirically shown how conversations that include conflicting perspectives have the potential to eliminate elite framing effects. In the context of debates, this encourages the notion of "the more politicians the merrier." Still, including more politicians also includes more people who want to make their point and persuade the audience. It is therefore important that both the moderator and the debate format function in such a way that highly populated debates do not turn into chaotic bickering with many interruptions.

An interesting illustration of how one topic can be presented in vastly different ways with different focal points can be taken from the election debate between presidential candidates Joe Biden and Donald Trump in October 2020. In a segment on immigration, there is discussion about children being separated from their parents at the US border. Trump tries to counter that frame by focusing attention away from the saddening idea of lonely kids by shifting the narrative to how the children are brought in illegally by evil people and how this is a criminal phenomenon. After being asked how the separated kids will be reunited with their parents, Trump says:

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> Children are brought here by coyotes and lots of bad people, cartels … And they are brought here, and they used to use them to get into our country. We now have as strong a border as we have ever had, we're over four hundred miles of brand new wall. You see the numbers and we let people in, but they have to come in legally. (Washington Post 2020)

Biden attempts to paint the act of holding children at the border as inhumane and bad. He focuses on the separation being criminal, shifting the connotation of "criminal" from the process of coming into the country, to the process of separating kids from their parents:

> It's not coyotes that bring them over, their parents were with them, they were separated from their parents. And that makes us a laughingstock and it violates every notion of who we are as a nation … Let's talk about what we are talking about. What happened is that kids were ripped from their parents' arms and separated. And now they cannot find over five hundred of sets of those parents. And those kids are alone. Nowhere to go. Nowhere to go. It's criminal. It's criminal. (Washington Post 2020)

Politics is complicated, political issues are complex, and reasoning about them is hard work sometimes. Frames can help make sense of the world by structuring and simplifying discourse (Leeper and Slothuus 2018). Furthermore, frames can provide people with common ground, the same "language" to reason with, which can even enable deliberation (Calvert and Warren 2014). This means political elites have an important role in structuring political issues, making sure people hear about issues they are otherwise not exposed to and consider a variety of arguments.

This explanatory and clarifying potential of frames can be clearly seen in a 2014 election debate statement made by Belgian politician Bart de Wever of the New Flemish Alliance (N-VA). In an attempt to explain how socioeconomic issues and the affairs of the different Belgian linguistic communities cannot be seen as two different things, he says:

> You will never be able to separate the socioeconomic and the community because they are one. Those are two doors, but you end up in the same living room. If you ever really want to put the country in order, you will have to intervene quickly socioeconomically, but then you will have to go to confederalism in the long run, I am absolutely convinced.[2] (De Wever 2014)

By using a visual metaphor of two doors that give access to the same room, de Wever hands the public a tool to think about the complicated design of Belgium. When further thinking about this issue, viewers can use that same frame to reason within themselves.

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Frames can clarify conflict and help people see how certain issues and policies are relevant for themselves. Frames could, therefore, assist people in forming their own opinions. Thomas Nelson and Donald Kinder (1996) phrase this as frames providing "recipes" for forming opinions, based on ingredients that elites deem important to the electorate. Competitive frames are thus very important. They allow alternative dimensions to be considered but prevent over-complication of policy issues. This helps citizens better grasp the meaning of policy issues and to understand the contrasting stances of different politicians on the issues.

Another example from de Wever in that same 2014 debate in Belgium shows how sometimes politicians try to counter competing frames in quite an explicit sense. When asked about whether he is an advocate of "splitting up the country," his answer is:

> That's an annoying question, because "splitting up" is reminiscent of divorce, which relates to very negative emotion. It is reminiscent of a revolution. It is reminiscent of the Crimea. We have never seen it that way. This is a gentle evolution toward Flanders and toward Europe, but it will certainly take a while. And the next step is confederalism, but that also seems logical to me since we are very different in our choices. (De Wever 2014)

De Wever calls out the negative connotations linked to "splitting up" and argues that does not match the wishes and standpoints of his party. He also shows he is aware of the emotional load that is attached to certain frames. The opportunity to respond to and dissect the meaning of common reasoning frames before the public eye is a valuable democratic opportunity, both for politicians to clarify their stance and provide context, and for citizens who see their politicians forced to explain themselves and justify their ideas. Especially by having multiple frames represented, politicians also provide multiple perspectives on issues, and in that way they automatically "control" each other in the debate. If an issue is framed in a unidimensional way by one politician, another politician can counter the framing effect by putting forward their own perspective as competing frame, that way levelling out the playing field. Voters are then "protected" from getting just one frame and are instead presented with a plethora of viewpoints they can consider, weigh, and reflect on.

Furthermore, frames can help relate complicated political matters to the public's own daily lives. For example, in the 2019 debate leading up to the EU elections between the presidential candidates for the European Commission (*Spitzenkandidaten*), lead candidate of the Party of European Socialists Frans Timmermans made a statement about Brexit: "Look at what the divisiveness of Brexit has done to the United Kingdom. Today, the United

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Kingdom looks like Game of Thrones on steroids. And that's because of this divisive politics" (EURACTIV 2019). This statement may not seem very dignified and is definitely a taunt directed at the UK. Still, it does speak to something many people relate to, grabs attention and interest, and simultaneously conveys Timmermans's stance on Brexit and message of warning.

A final example in this section on framing in election debates is obtained in a Dutch TED in the lead-up to the same European elections. Esther de Lange of the Christin Democratic Appeal (CDA) attempts to set her party apart from other parties through presenting its climate policy as the reasonable alternative between conservative and climate-skeptic right-wing party Forum voor Democratie (FvD) and green party GroenLinks:

> But do you know what I find so unfortunate in this debate? You can actually almost see the raised middle finger to the next generation, sorry to say it, from Forum, who actually say: yes, those Paris goals, which the CDA would like to achieve, we do not need to achieve them, because it is all too expensive and way too difficult. And then you have a party like GroenLinks with a pedantic finger: we shall and we must and everything has to go our way, and if it is not possible in Europe, then the Netherlands should march ahead of the troops. Let the CDA be the helping hand and say: if we want to achieve the climate goals, then we will have to do so at European level, because this is the only way to make it feasible and affordable, retaining jobs in the Netherlands and not too difficult for those people who just cannot afford it. (NOS 2019)

Through figurative language, she presents two extremes, which is likely to reason with people and speak to the imagination: giving the finger is impolite and disrespectful, and nobody likes to be lectured by people who always know better. Depicting Forum and GroenLinks that way naturally makes the more moderate position of De Lange's own party seem reasonable and, framed as a helping hand, favorable as well.

Frames in TEDs can be manipulative and can disguise alternate perspectives. However, especially because of the moderated clash format of election debates, framing can also serve the exposure of voters to a plethora of perspectives, provide them with reasoning tools, and help them better understand issues and relate politics to their personal lives. For this to happen, it is important that citizens do not use heuristics or shortcuts to decide on their opinion regarding the different frames. One heuristic "tool" that politicians sometimes use to persuade voters, is the strategic use of emotions.

Emotional Appeals in Televised Election Debates

Emotions in debates are not necessarily problematic. Several scholars have pointed out that dichotomizing emotion and reason is not desirable,

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and that through less rational communication, it is easier to make a message more cognitively and emotionally available to marginalized groups (Bächtiger et al. 2018b).

However, politicians have been accused of rhetorically using emotions, not to connect with or reach citizens but to manipulate them. John Dryzek (2010) explains how the main suspicion of rhetoric in democratic theory is that "effective rhetoric can involve emotional manipulation of an audience's mood (*pathos*) and so a kind of coercion." Chambers (2009) explains how the criticism toward emotional rhetoric often consists of two reasons. First, passion is not reason. If decisions are made based on emotions and gut feeling, they are arguably less "thought through" and more based on heuristic cues. This potentially gives rise to less informed choices. Second, Chambers cites Kant, who insists that rhetoric aims "to win minds over to the advantage of the speaker before they can judge and to rob them of their freedom" (2009: 325), claiming that emotion is manipulative.

Karin Wahl-Jorgensen (2012: 2) argues for more consideration of emotions in the study of political communication, because of growing empirical evidence on the central role emotions play in motivating and shaping political participation: "people participate because they *care* or feel passionately about an issue." Negative emotions can mobilize participation. Still, emotions in politics, particularly in forms like storytelling, can contribute to fostering empathy and solidarity, furthering perspective-taking and reflection (Wahl-Jorgensen 2012).

Politicians in election debates often use emotional appeals to persuade their audience. Fear, for instance, is widely used to convince people of a standpoint (Altheide 2006). Politicians sometimes appeal to people's suspicion of the unknown and fear of terrorist attacks when arguing against migration. For example, during a 2017 election debate in the Netherlands, Geert Wilders, leader of the right-wing, anti-Islam Party for Freedom (PVV) debates Gert-Jan Segers (Christian Union) about whether Islam forms a threat for the country. Wilders asserts:

> So I think that if we take a resilient stance and say, "We must deal with Islam," then we will not weaken our rule of law, our democracy, but rather strengthen it, but that takes guts … Not all people who adhere to Islam, but Islam itself has different rules than we do, does not play by our rules. So if on the one hand we stick to the rules of the game and Islam does not, then that means that at the end of the day, yes Mr. Segers, we have lost everything we stand for. (NOS 2017)

Wilders inspires fear of the Islam, calling it a danger to the rule of law, something "different" (not playing by the same rules), and something

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threatening things that are important to voter. A bit later, Wilders goes on to accuse Segers: "You are letting in even more asylum seekers, among which are terrorists. You are importing more and more Islam. I was hoping to find an ally in you to protect the Christians" (NOS 2017). Emotions and framing do not cancel each other out, but often go hand in hand. By connecting both Islam and asylum seekers to terrorists, Wilders frames both as a something to be scared of. He further plays on emotions by bringing in the idea of people that need to be protected, depicting Islam as even more of a threat. This is the type of rhetorical use of emotions that inspires simple categories and shortcuts to think about the often-complicated topic of migration. Simplifying complicated topics by means of emotions is not bad in and of itself, but in this example, we see only over-simplification and bias, and a scarcity of argumentation and reasoning. A sole appeal to fear and feelings of danger is far from deliberative. Examples like this one show how important it is to have multiple politicians present in debates, so they can provide the audience with more than one perspective to reason with.

Another example of an attempt to induce fear can be taken from a recent TED in the US. When he was still running to be the Democratic presidential candidate for the 2020 election, Mayor Pete Buttigieg prophesized chaos:

> I will tell you what the Russians want. They don't have a political party. They want chaos, and chaos is what is coming our way … If you think the last four years have been chaotic, divisive, toxic, exhausting, imagine spending the better part of 2020 with Bernie Sanders versus Donald Trump. Think about what that will be like for this country. (Hunnicutt and Renshaw 2020)

With his statement, Buttigieg attempts to invoke fear of the Russians, which he then uses to ask people to imagine a "worst case" scenario. Although there is a scent of fearmongering to these words, imagining certain situations brings them closer to people's own experience, which could also spur further internal reasoning on the desirability of such a situation.

Cho and Choy (2011) argue that the combination of the emotionally arousing medium of television in combination with the competitive nature of debates heightens the chances of emotional responses in viewers. Correspondingly, the spectacle character of TEDs contrasts the rational associations people tend to have with politics, generating excitement, making politics more interesting (Coleman 2020). Politicians can use the already arousing platform of TEDs to further trigger certain emotions. This is done not only done in relation to political issues but also toward

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opponents. For instance, at a leaders' debate in the UK's 2017 elections, Prime Minister Theresa May was not present herself. Instead, fellow Conservative Party politician Amber Rudd took May's place. Although her party's perspective was represented, other politicians took May's absence as a chance to attempt to spur anger and indignation in the public. May had decided not to attend the debate to focus her energy on meeting people on the campaign trail.

While some people at first may see this a sensible, reasonable choice, the other politicians took a clear stance in condemning her absence. Most notable were contributions by Liberal Democrat Tim Farron, who made clear in his opening statement that voters should be frustrated about this, while simultaneously targeting May's policy: "Where do you think Theresa May is tonight? Take a look out your window. She might be out there sizing up your house to pay for your social care" (TV Live News 2017). In his closing statement, Farron returns to this point, inspiring indignation and anger based on the idea that May has neglected the voters and is indifferent about them. Simultaneously, he presents himself as a funny, relatable person, referring to the popular show *The Great British Bake Off*: "The Prime Minister is not here tonight. She can't be bothered, so why should you? In fact, *Bake Off* is on BBC2 next, why not make yourself a brew. You're not worth Theresa May's time, don't give her yours" (TV Live News 2017). Farron's closing sentences might not seem particularly deliberative, telling people not to bother and choose an entertainment show over a political one. Still, his statements received quite a lot of (social) media attention. Farron's words might cause some to wonder about their reasons for supporting certain politicians, and what characters of representatives are important to them.

Politicians can also employ more positive emotions to influence citizen's opinions. However, sending positive and hope-inspiring messages, politicians may be suspected of pursuing a political agenda. For example, at the end of a TED in 2019, Dutch right-wing liberal Klaas Dijkhoff (VVD) had one "challenge opportunity" left: he could challenge one of the other politicians to briefly debate an issue of Dijkhoff's choice. All other politicians had used up their challenging time, so he had the chance to finish big. He challenged young newcomer Rob Jetten of the Democrats '66 (D66), but instead of posing an issue and attacking Jetten, Dijkhoff said:

> "But of course, what we have done here, is not how politics works. We have magnified, rather than bridged differences … In politics, you have to work together, you have to do the opposite of what has happened here tonight … And that is why I really want to give you the last word of the day, make it a good one." (VVD 2019)

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Dijkhoff's action was followed by mixed responses. For some, it evoked sympathy, because they believed Dijkhoff genuinely wanted to do something nice for his junior colleague. Others did not believe Dijkhoff's words were sincere but rather an attempt to win sympathy points and promote his own position.

Still, despite the manipulative potential of rhetoric, appealing to emotions can arguably coax more reflection and make people more open to other arguments than their own. As George Marcus and colleagues (2000: 1) state: "emotion and reason interact to produce a thoughtful and attentive citizenry." And it has been argued that even when a message is processed cognitively, there is an emotional core to that cognition (Morris et al. 2005). In an attempt to connect emotions and democracy through rhetoric, James Martin (2014: chap. 7) suggests it might be effective to embrace the emotional side of rhetoric. Since emotions can incite citizen's attention and dedication to specific issues and ideas, they have the power to shape democratic engagement. He draws from psychoanalytical and neuroscience literature to assert that emotions help people situate issues in relation to their own world, through degrees of proximity and urgency, sympathy and concern, aversion, or hostility.

An example can be found in the October 2020 debate between Kamala Harris and Mike Pence. Harris warns the public with a rather daunting statement about the Republicans' plans to dismantle the Affordable Care Act: "If you have a preexisting condition, heart disease, diabetes, breast cancer, they're coming for you. If you love someone who has a preexisting condition, they are coming for you. If you love someone who has a preexisting condition, they're coming for you" (Guardian 2020). The elements Martin talks about are there: Harris speaks to relevance and proximity of the issue, making it more concrete, imaginable, and applicable to people's personal situations. Besides that, the idea that someone is "coming for you" gives a sense of urgency, like you are being chased, and it generates concerns, for both you and your loved ones. Harris speaks to fear, posing the Republican plans as a threat, which prompts people to think about their situation and for instance, what would happen if their diabetic mother would no longer have access to health care.

When emotions can help people take the perspective of others, this stimulates a more reflective citizenry (Muradova 2020). Put differently: the use of emotions and not just dry policy statements might be the reason a viewer pauses to reflect (Davidson et al. 2017). A good example of how emotions are used to promote perspective-taking in election debates is the way Belgian social democrat Steve Stevaert (2003) talks about doctors who perform euthanasia being fired based on Christian considerations in a 2003 TED:

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> My father is a deeply Christian person. If he were a doctor, and if someone who was suffering endlessly would request euthanasia, my father, who is deeply Christian, would accept that, and I would not tolerate in a society that my father would be fired for that. What would you do if you were a doctor and there was someone who would be suffering endlessly who would ask you as a doctor to do your duty? And then to be kicked out?

Stevaert seems to be attempting to both make himself more relatable as a caring son of a devout father, and make the subject more relatable to viewers. Not everyone has experience with the topic of euthanasia, but most people do have a father. The topic may be scary or seem taboo to some, so by bringing in the idea of a Christian dad, Stevaert places the topic emotionally closer to people. Furthermore, he also tries to reach people who are opposed to euthanasia from a Christian standpoint and tries to show how a Christian perspective may also entail not accepting intolerable suffering of others, speaking to their compassion. He even talks about not accepting a society in which his own father would be fired for following his Christian beliefs. This was never on the table to begin with, since his father is not a doctor, but it does give extra emotional weight to the situation. Stevaert concludes with an even more direct perspective-taking prompt, asking "What would you do?" and challenging people to put themselves in the shoes of a deeply Christian doctor.

Emotions are important for an inclusive, diverse democracy. Sometimes, irrationality is needed to "shock the dominant consensus into perceiving what it has been blind to," making sure everyone has a voice, including marginalized groups (Parkinson 2003: 184). By orienting them, emotional appeals in TEDs can help citizens relate to an issue based on their own world, and show them if, why, and how they should care. This can make people more reflective and encourages them to challenge their own preexisting values and judgments.

Conclusion

On the one hand, "deliberative theorists have given no specific thought to how televised election debates might fit within their proposed democratic system." On the other hand, election debate scholars often accept TEDs in their established form, taking it as a given that the debates are the way they are, instead of thinking about "how these major events could engender a more deliberative democracy" (Coleman 2020: 10).

This article is situated at the intersection of deliberative theorists and election debate scholars, presenting televised election debates through a

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deliberative lens, against a backdrop of criticisms on TEDs. With the aim to draw a more extensive image of their merits and demerits, I have tried to shed more light on the potential of televised debates to help constitute an effective deliberative system, joining reflective actors in interaction, and circumventing manipulative dangers.

The concept of televised election debates was laid out, their reported effects were displayed, and an explanation was provided on the deliberative lens and systemic approach. Subsequently, I reviewed existing work on election debates from a deliberative standpoint and further clarified the approach to debates as communication between politician and voter, stressing the importance of reflection, interaction, and the role of internal deliberation. Although direct interaction of politicians and voters is not an option in TEDs, multiple opinions can still be represented in the debate. The other politicians (and sometimes moderators and audience questions) facilitate an implicit critical discussion between politician and voter and can progress deliberation within for both politicians and voters. This leads to politicians considering multiple perspectives, to which they tailor their standpoints, justifications, and counterarguments. Still, manipulation through rhetoric can impede an equal weighing of all arguments and viewpoints, both through framing and through appealing to emotions.

Yet, rhetoric could also stimulate more reflection, by having people consider other perspectives than their own when they hear multiple sides of an issue and are relate what they hear to their own life and experiences. Both emotions and frames can help people break away from just seeing issues from their own point of view. The use of rhetoric can also potentially engage citizens, tell a story, and help them connect issues to their own situation, which can help people reflect on matters more extensively. One could even hypothesize this can lead to more motivation to interact with people with different perspectives, even if it is just internally. Emotion and framing are thus not necessarily enemies of deliberation and the deliberative function of debates: sometimes emotional appeals are the only way to bridge differences and reach specific audiences, through framing issues in a moving language (Parkinson 2003). Nonetheless, we should be wary of the strategic use of framing and emotions and be on the lookout for manipulation. To account for this, the presence of, room for, and engagement with multiple viewpoints in TEDs is extremely important and constructive. This can be stimulated by inviting multiple politicians to the debate and having a moderator (or moderators) who guides the discussion in such a way that politicians stay on topic and have equal opportunity to voice their own perspectives, as well as address those of others.

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Framing and emotion do not make TEDs unsuitable for a place in a deliberative system. On the contrary, their format is well suited for informing the larger public, spurring reflection, and making politics more accessible and relatable. As Calvert and Warren (2014) did with mini-publics, the specific design features and structure of TEDs should be used to work toward making them a better, more deliberative institution within a deliberative system. More research is needed on how TEDs can be constructed to provide the best possible condition for inspiring reflective thinking about a multitude of perspectives in different contexts and countries, as well as for different people. Features like the role of the moderator(s), the number of participating politicians, the questions and statements used to guide the debate, and input from the public are important to take into consideration. Furthermore, like Davidson et al. (2017) suggested, sequencing TEDs with other deliberative fora could expand their potential.

All things considered, TEDs clearly have their flaws and are not a perfect deliberative instrument. Still, due to their confrontational, mediated format, they also have benefits that suggest these debates could play a constructive role in spiking reflection and engagement, precisely because of strategically used framing and emotional appeals. Therefore, I argue that we should refrain from hastily dismissing TEDs as "just a show" and stop paying any attention to them. Rather, these debates need to be critically assessed to learn how they can benefit democracy and what can be done to improve them.

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NOTES

1. A more elaborate account of the link between pragma-dialectics and deliberative theory has previously been presented by Nicole Curato (2012), who refers to deliberation's linguistic foundations in the work of Jürgen Habermas, to make an argument for the match between the two disciplines.
2. . All originally non-English examples were translated by the author.

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