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Television in the Legislature: The Impact of Cameras in the House of Commons

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The introduction of television cameras in legislatures met, in many countries, with serious debate about the potential benefits and costs of broadcasting legislative debate. There were concerns about tendency for cameras to produce less focused, more attention-seeking behaviour amongst party members, and especially leaders. This work draws together the literatures on televising debates, and on personalisation, to explore the impact of introduction of cameras in the Canadian House of Commons. Analyses are based on content analytic database of over 11,000 questions asked from 1957 to 2004; they suggest no discernible impact of cameras on House debates. These results are discussed as they pertain to both the current literature on personalisation, and the design of legislative institutions and communication policies.

What happens if you put television cameras in legislative assemblies? There are consequences for the flow of information outside the assembly, certainly. Citizens are better able to see and hear what happens inside; journalists, even those not in the press gallery, are able to see and report on what happens as well. If the main goal is the communication of legislative information beyond the walls of the legislature—more importantly, into the homes of the voting public—then television cameras in legislatures seems like a very good idea.

There are potential disadvantages as well, however. It may be easier for citizens to observe and hold accountable their legislative representatives; but it may also be easier for legislative representatives to win popular support through their behaviour in the legislature. This can change, fundamentally and negatively, the function of legislative debate. The focus may no longer be on legislation; instead, the focus may be on the outside world. Legislative debate may become indistinguishable from campaign stump speeches. The behaviour of party leaders may be particularly strongly affected. They may be under pressure to steal the spotlight and to draw

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attention to the party's broader interests. Television cameras may, in short, transform parliamentary debate from a venue in which each member can participate (effectively) to one in which attention-seeking party leaders dominate the floor.

To what extent is this the case? This paper provides some preliminary answers. It starts by drawing together work on the introduction of television cameras in legislatures with work on the participation of party leaders in legislative activities, and on personalisation in politics. Trends in leaders both asking and answering questions are then explored, using a body of content analytic data on Question Period in the Canadian House of Commons from the mid-1950s to the mid-2000s (20 years before the introduction of television to roughly 30 years after).

In spite of early (and in fact ongoing) concerns from elected representatives, there is little evidence that leaders play an increased role in Parliamentary debate as a consequence of introducing television cameras to the legislature, at least in Canada. Though counterintuitive, this finding is important, not just for scholars of political communication but for those more directly involved in the design of legislatures and legislative communications policies. Alongside some previous work in the field, our results suggest that the consequences of television cameras in legislatures may be rather limited. Canadian politics may already have been highly leader oriented, and politics may well be increasingly leader oriented outside the House of Commons. But inside the House, this particular concern about the introduction of television cameras seems to have been greatly exaggerated.

1. The cases for and against television

The early (1977) introduction of television in the Canadian House of Commons was preceded by heated debate. Opinions ranged from highly optimistic views about the power of such broadcasts to improve legislative proceedings, to fears that such a move would irreparably change representatives' behaviour and the legislative process on the whole for the worse. Although opinions diverged considerably, they typically relied on a common (and intuitive) assumption that the way legislators act would change substantially after the introduction of television cameras.

Originally, the case for introducing television cameras to the Canadian House of Commons relied primarily on the idea of creating an 'electronic Hansard' which would more easily and accurately document the proceedings of the House. This idea was not exclusive to the Canadian case—the idea that television cameras can enhance transparency and provide a more faithful account of legislative sessions was critical to the introduction of television cameras elsewhere as well.

Some proponents of the idea also claimed that televising legislative sessions would 'enhance the power and influence of Parliament over that of the Executive', perhaps to the point of augmenting the importance of constituency opinion in the

legislative setting (Barnett and Gaber, 1992). Moreover, by having legislative proceedings become a more prominent part of televised news, MPs could have a more accessible platform from which to increase the salience of issues discussed, and to move debate on these issues along (Cook, 1986). Relatedly, televised proceedings would serve voters as an additional source of information about their representative specifically and the running of government more generally, making it easier for people to make electoral decisions (Cook, 1986). Overall, an increased media presence would be beneficial to the representative democratic process, encouraging a more direct connection between representatives and their constituents.

Representatives in Canada and elsewhere nevertheless expressed concerns that cameras would adversely affect legislative proceedings. One fear amongst Canadian Members of Parliament was that 'tapes could be used out of context to embarrass a Member or to misrepresent what went on in the House' (Robertson 2005, p. 3). More broadly, there were worries that the ability to watch MPs work would distract viewers from the substance of what they were working on, or would somehow 'distort' the reality of the session.

In the USA, the introduction of television into the House of Representatives was preceded by concerns that mediatisation would lead to the inequitable promotion of parties' interests due to biases that could arise in the process of editing legislative footage and the broadcasting of such footage by news networks (Franklin, 1989). Some opponents of televising the House of Commons in the UK went so far as to argue that 'television would alter the essential character of the House' (Franklin 1989, p. 488); such alarm mirrored the apprehension, expressed at the 1968 Geneva Symposium on parliaments and the media, that televising parliamentary affairs could cut down on productive 'discussion, speculation and that necessary interval for prudent reasoning which is the essence of the parliamentary method' (Wilson, 1970: 23).

A number of critics asserted that sober debate over proposed legislation would be overshadowed by more showy procedures of a legislature—those which tend to lend themselves to the kind of dramatic content favoured by the media, which would be easier to use in footage clipped from a day's recording. Specifically, there was substantial concern that Question Period in Canada, and Question Time in the UK and Australia, might eclipse other aspects of a parliamentary session to become the main focus of Parliament, not only for the media but for MPs themselves (Miller, 1985; Kalnay, 1989; Robertson, 2005; Young, 2007). Given that Question Period was considered by Members to be 'the only [thing] that gets them attention back home', the worry was that MPs would capitalize on the recording of Question Period sessions to play to the cameras rather than focus on the substance of the issues being discussed (Frasier, 1979; Kalnay 1989, p. 10; Barnett and Gaber, 1992).

This fear was related to a more specific subset of concerns about the effects of television on individuals' behaviour. A growing body of research suggests that televised portrayals of politicians tend to augment the importance of physical appearance and actions (e.g. Lang and Lang, 1984; Graber, 1990; Swanson and Mancini, 1996; Druckman, 2003). This occurs most prominently during a campaign period, when politicians' (and the public's) exposure to media coverage is greatest; but naturally also takes place at any other point when politicians are featured on broadcast news. The worry among both MPs and other critics of televising legislatures, then, was that politicians would be forced to concentrate on looking good for legislative cameras—being subjected, essentially, to the kind of scrutiny previously found only during electoral campaigns.

For the most part, the specifics of these arguments do not figure into our argument; what matters is that they illustrate a widespread belief, both in Canada and elsewhere, that introducing television cameras would change legislative behaviour. In spite of the broad collection of concerns raised about introducing cameras into legislatures in Canada and elsewhere, however, there has been relatively little work on the consequences since. In what may be the most comprehensive account of the effects of television in the House, Robertson (2005) reports that what changes have been observed have all been fairly minor: MPs' attire has changed as certain colours and clothing look better on television than others; Members are more likely to read speeches rather than speak off the cuff; those near someone who is being filmed speaking must be more careful 'not to doze off, bury their heads in a newspaper, or have inappropriate expressions on their face' (p. 6). These findings are hardly the drastic effects predicted by opponents of televising the House, however. And no other research on the Canadian case has searched and found evidence of more meaningful behavioural or procedural changes arising from the adaptation of the 1977 motion.

These limited findings are mirrored in studies outside Canada. In the USA, there is some indication that the introduction of the CSPAN-2 channel had an impact on the frequency of filibusters and the length of legislative sessions in the House of Representatives, as both increased after CSPAN-2's launch (Mixon, Hobson and Upadhyaya, 2001; Mixon *et al*., 2003). The authors argue that this is primarily due to the free advertising that televised congressional sessions provide for Representatives. There is little evidence that representatives changed their behaviour in other ways following the introduction of CSPAN-2, however. In the UK, there is a similar lack of evidence concerning MPs' behaviour after the introduction of cameras in the House of Commons. In their study of the outcomes of televising House sessions, for example, Heatherington *et al*. (1990) find that that the British media's coverage of the House of Commons increased by 80% after the introduction of televised legislature; but they observed no significant changes in legislative behaviour as a consequence.

2. The personalisation of politics

The fact that research focused on the impact of television cameras in legislatures yields few results is surprising when contrasted with the growing body of work on the personalisation of modern politics. This work argues, in short, that '[i]n a trend that has been shared by all of the liberal democracies, politics has become increasingly personalized', with an increased focus (in legislature, the media and among voters) on political leaders and individual politicians over the traditionally dominant political parties (McAllister 2007, p. 571). There is some disagreement over when exactly such a trend began—some point to the elections of Margaret Thatcher in Britain in 1979 and Ronald Reagan in the USA in 1980, while others claim that the phenomenon stretches back further, to the beginning of Canada's 'Trudeaumania' in 1968, for instance. A large number of studies provide evidence that political personalisation is increasing across a wide range of countries; and that this signals a fundamental shift in the way that both parliamentary and presidential systems function (Mughan, 1993; Wattenberg, 1998; Mughan, 2000; Poguntke and Webb, 2005; Rahat and Sheafer, 2007; Blondel and Thiébault, 2010; Silke and Maier, 2010). However, there has been a recent trend towards viewing the personalisation thesis as overstated in light of the mixed results of prior studies (Karvonen, 2010; Kriesi, 2011; Van Aelst *et al.*, 2012).[1]

Variation in findings may have to do with the fact that personalisation can occur in different ways (focused on leaders specifically, or on personalities more broadly), and at several different venues (in media, in legislatures, etc.) (see Balmas *et al.*, 2012 and Rahat and Sheafer, 2007 for some valuable categorisations). In the Canadian case, it is worth noting that the literatures relating to personalisation point in different directions: there is evidence that Canadian campaign media coverage focuses on leaders at the expense of parties (Taras, 1990; Mendelsohn, 1996; Meisel and Mendelsohn, 2001), and that leadership selection within parties is increasingly personalised (e.g. Courtney 1995); but studies of the impact of leader evaluations on vote choice provide little evidence of an increase in evaluations' importance over time (e.g. Gidengil and Blais, 2007; Bélanger and Nadeau, 2009).[2]

[1]The literature on personalisation is vast, and we have pointed to just a few examples here. See also works by Wattenberg, 1991; Dalton *et al.*, 2000; Mughan, 2000; Langer, 2007; Shenhav and Sheafer, 2008. Also see work on presidentialisation, e.g. Mughan, 2000; Pogunkte and Webb, 2007 and work on personalisation as a consequence of media, e.g. Glasser and Salmon 1991; Sigelman and Bullock, 1991; Kasse, 1994; Wilke and Reinemann, 2001; Reinemann and Wilke, 2007.

[2]These findings are echoed in work in Germany (Kasse, 1994; Vetter and Gabriel, 1998; Brettschneider and Gabriel, 2002; Schulz *et al.*, 2005), the UK (Graetz and McAllister, 1989; Bartle and Crewe, 2002) and the USA (Hayes, 2009) Work also suggests that television plays a small role in comparison with other factors (Elmelund-Præstekær and Hopmann, 2012).

Our investigation here can be seen not just as test of the concerns about television cameras in legislatures, then, but also as a study of personalisation in legislative behaviour. Theories of personalisation suggest that leaders may participate more frequently in activities in the House of Commons after the introduction of television cameras. The existing evidence on personalisation, however, in Canada and elsewhere, seems rather divided.[3]

3. Methods and analysis

Our analysis relies on a content analytic database of nearly 11,000 oral questions asked during Question Period in sessions of the House of Commons between May 1958 and May 2004, an expanded version of data sets used by Soroka *et al.* (2009) and Penner *et al.* (2006).[4] Although Question Period was not codified until 1964, it existed in a less institutionalised form for nearly 100 years prior, and over time it has not only been a crucial venue for opposition parties to bring the government to task on a variety of issues, but has served as an exceptional media opportunity for government and opposition MPs alike. The media exposure that Question Period accords to Members of Parliament makes it a likely place for leaders to assert themselves, and thus, perhaps, for personalisation to be evident (a more complete description of Canadian Question Period is offered in Penner *et al.*, 2006 and Soroka *et al.*, 2009). Notably, unlike Question Time in the UK, the government does not have access to opposition questions in advance, and there is no separate time for questions for the prime minister. Instead, all ministers, including the prime minister, can be subject to questions during each instance of Question Period.

In order to gauge the dominance of party leaders over other party members, we focus here on the first question put forth by each party, each day. The first question asked by each party tends to focus on the most critical issue for that party, that day. We focus, then, on which member of each opposition party asks that question, as well as who in government answers it. Our expectation is that the introduction of television cameras in the House produces an incentive for parties to focus more on their leaders; put differently, that there will be personalisation in legislative behaviour. This personalisation will be denoted by an increase in the

[3] We might also point to a related body of work on the participation of party leaders in legislative debate in the UK. This work is not focused on personalisation, per se, nor has it dealt directly with the introduction of television. It has however explored over-time trends in the legislative behaviour of party leaders; and it, too, suggests that personalisation in legislative behaviour is not increasing over time. Indeed, work points to decreasing participation from British prime ministers from the 1860s to 1990s (Dunleavy *et al.*, 1990, 1993); a similar trend is evident for major Opposition party leaders as well (Rush, 2013).

[4] Full methodological details on the database are not provided here, but are available in Soroka *et al.* (2009) and Penner *et al.* (2006).

proportion of first questions asked and answered by leaders (rather than other party members). It is possible that other factors, such as absences from the House, may also influence who asks and who answers. However, we would expect that media-driven personalisation effects, should they exist, would incentivise attendance at Question Period, as well, which would likely minimise the confounding impacts of attendance.

Due to data constraints (old Hansard is not available electronically, but rather coded by hand), we focus here on the first 70 days of each parliamentary session. If the session had 70 days or fewer, we included the entire session. (This may bias our results towards greater rather than lesser emphasis on party leaders, given that leaders may play a somewhat more prominent role immediately following an election.) The structure of the data set is relatively simple. Each case is a party's first question in that day's Oral Question Period. The number of 'first questions' varies over time, of course, alongside the number of Opposition parties.[5] But on a typical day we have between two and five first questions, each of which is coded for party, and for whether or not it was asked, or answered, by a party leader.[6]

Figure 1 shows a simple but very telling analysis. The figure shows the proportion of first questions asked by party leaders, for each of the 24–37th Parliaments. Thin dotted lines show changes in governments; prime ministers are indicated along the top of the figure to help put the results in context; and the introduction of television cameras in the House is denoted by a thick dotted line in the middle of the figure. There is, in short, no systematic change in the proportion of questions asked by party leaders, at least not a systematic change before and after the introduction of cameras. (Though there are certain Parliaments when Opposition leaders seem to have played a more prominent role, including the 27th and 37th Parliaments.)

Figure 2 repeats the process for prime ministers—it displays the proportion of first questions that were answered by the party leader in government. Comparing the two figures, we can see that Opposition leaders play a much larger role in their parties' behaviour in Question Period than do government leaders, as we should expect. But there is no evidence that leaders are more prominent in Question Period after the introduction of television cameras.

[5]The Canadian Alliance and the Progressive Conservative Party are both included separately in the data set until the creation of the Conservative Party of Canada in 2003, while the Social Credit Party of Canada and the Ralliement créditiste du Québec are included as separate parties prior to their merger into a single national party in 1971.

[6]Although at no point during this period were there five opposition parties, there have been a number of periods with four opposition parties and some number of independents. This is how some days have five 'first' questions.

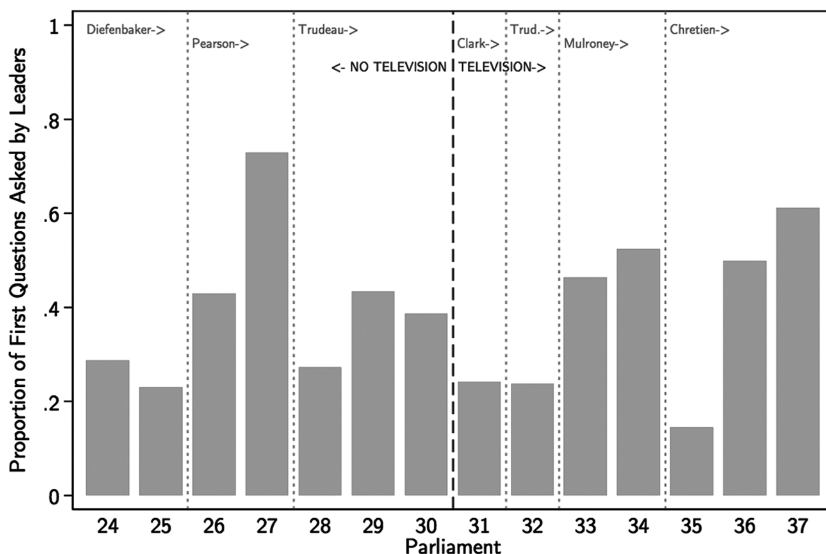

Figure 1 Party leaders and oral questions: asking

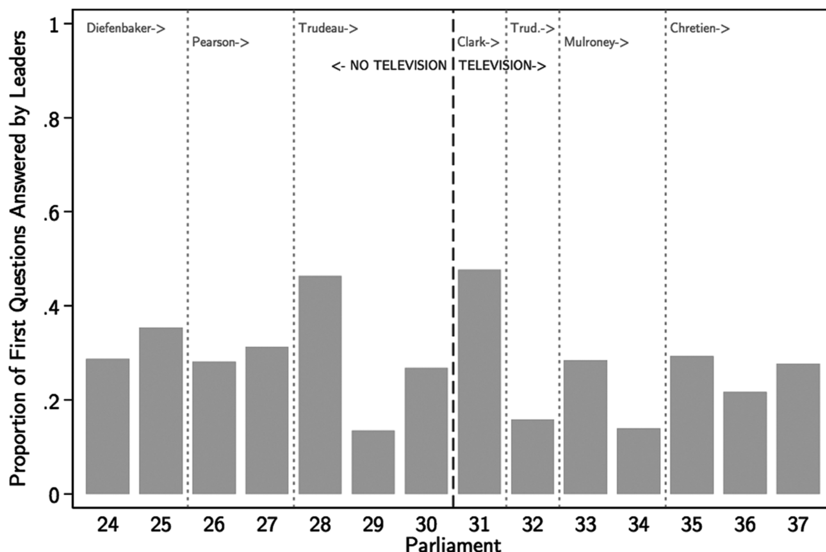

Figure 2 Party leaders and oral questions: answering

Trends in Figures 1 and 2 are subject to a more systematic analysis in Table 1. The table shows results from a probit regression model predicting the likelihood that a given question is asked (in the first column) or answered (in the second column) by

Table 1 Leaders' propensity to ask/answer oral questions

	Asking	Answering
Parliament	0.048*** (0.005)	0.002 (0.005)
Television	−0.423*** (0.037)	−0.073 (0.042)
Session day	−0.005*** (0.002)	−0.003* (0.001)
Session day squared	0.000** (0.000)	0.000* (0.000)
# Seats	0.002*** (0.000)	0.000** (0.000)
BQ	0.105** (0.036)	
CA	0.454*** (0.035)	
NDP	0.135*** (0.025)	
PC	0.139*** (0.026)	0.032 (0.023)
Reform	−0.087* (0.037)	
n	3848	3853

Cells contain margin change coefficients from a binary probit estimation, with standard errors in parentheses.
BQ, bloc québécois; CA, Canadian Alliance; NDP, New Democratic Party; PC, Progressive Conservative Party.
*$p < 0.05$; **$p < 0.01$; ***$p < 0.001$.

a party leader. The first variable, *Parliament*, is simply the Parliament number, capturing the over-time trend. The second, *Television*, is a binary variable equal to one for the period after television cameras were introduced in the House.[7] These are the two variables of primary interest, but we also include a number of control variables. First, we control for the possibility that the prominence of leaders varies over the course of the first 70 days of a session. *Session Day* is simply the day of the current session; including Session Day Squared allows for the possibility that the over-time trend is non-linear. *# Seats* captures the size of each party in the House, with the expectation that larger parties may have a greater or lesser incentive to focus on the leader. Subsequent variables are binary and capture the different parties, exploring the possibility that parties have different tendencies to rely more or less on their leaders. The Liberals are the residual/comparison category here; since only they and the Progressive Conservatives formed the government during this period, the 'Answering' model includes only the Progressive Conservative variable.

Results in Table 1 are shown as marginal change coefficients—they capture the change in the probability that a given question is asked or answered by a party leader, based on a one-unit change in the independent variable. The first variable

[7] We also tested a model in which we include an interaction between Parliament and television, allowing for the possibility that the over-time trend changes from the pre- to post-television period. Given that the Television variable is binary; however, the interaction is highly collinear with television; and results do not suggest any sharp difference in over-time trends across the two periods. We thus present just the simple model here.

in our first model of Asking reveals a trend that is not evident in Figure 1, then—it suggests that, controlling for other factors in the model, the probability that a question is asked by a party leader increases by almost 5% from each Parliament to the next. The television variable suggests a marked drop with the introduction of television, however. Taken together, the two variables suggest that while there has been a steady but slight upward trend in leaders' participation in asking questions, there was also a sharp drop in participation following the introduction of television. Yet we do not suggest that leaders actually withdraw from asking with the introduction of television. Rather, we suspect our findings are due to some peculiarities in specific parliaments—especially the reduced participation of both Clark and Trudeau, the two prime ministers immediately following the introduction of television cameras. Personalities (not personalisation) may be driving our results here. Either way, there clearly is not evidence here that television increased leaders' participation in the House.

The remaining variables do not speak directly to personalisation, but reveal some interesting tendencies nevertheless. The negative coefficient for *Session Day*, combined with the positive coefficient for *Session Day Squared*, suggest that leaders are more prominent early in the session, and their prominence declines non-linearly from Day 1 to Day 70. The positive coefficient for *# Seats* suggests that larger parties actually have leaders ask more rather than less first questions. It may be that larger parties are larger in part because of the success of their leaders; it may be that the smaller parties tend to be more populist power sharing in the legislature. These are purely conjectures at this stage, though.

Populism appears to be clearly implicated in the party variables, however. The Reform Party is the only party that features its leader less than the Liberal Party, our comparison category. This is unsurprising, given that the Reform Party had an explicit goal, based on their brand of populism, to transform the House by emphasising the role of individual MPs over party leaders (Docherty 1997, 2005). All other parties use their leaders significantly more than the Liberal Party. (This is particularly true of the Canadian Alliance—the immediate successor of the Reform Party and one of the two parties, along with the Progressive Conservatives, that merged to form the current Conservative Party.)

Results for Answering, in the second column of Table 1, suggest a similar story. There is, again, a downward trend in leader participation over the course of the session (*Session Day*) and increased participation based on party size (*# Seats*). There is no significant trend over time (*Parliament*), however; or with the introduction of television (*Television*). Again, there is no sign that the introduction of television had a marked impact on leaders' participation in Question Period.

4. Conclusions

Early work focused on the introduction of television cameras in legislatures expressed serious concerns about the consequences it would have for the behaviour of politicians, and the quality of legislative debate. Commentators were in some cases particularly concerned about the incentives that cameras would provide for party leaders to play an increasingly prominent role in parliamentary debate. Those concerns have also been reflected in a more recent literature on the personalisation of politics, both inside and outside the legislature, spurred on in part by the nature of television news.

That said, our data provide no evidence that the introduction of cameras in the Canadian House of Commons made any difference to the participation of party leaders in oral questions. These results are notable, since past work suggests that this is one venue in which the impact of cameras should be especially evident. Question Period is the parliamentary venue most likely to appear in media coverage, after all. And party leaders should be especially likely to respond to the media-seeking incentives of televised debates. In short, if legislative activity is becoming inordinately focused on attracting outside attention (as a consequence of the introduction of cameras, at least) this should be evident in our data. It is not.

Our analysis has several limitations, of course. Our results only speak to the prominence of MPs in oral questions—we do not address their behaviour at other times in the legislature, nor do we examine their behaviour outside the legislature. We also do not examine the language used in public debate. It may well be that while levels of participation have not changed, the content of that participation has. For instance, given that media organisations only have a limited amount of time and attention for various stories, it is possible that party leaders are more focused on asking memorable questions on the most salient issues of the day, rather than asking more questions, so they can make television news broadcasts. This and other potential effects of the introduction of television cameras are a worthy topic of future research.

So too is the possibility that that while the Canadian House of Commons shows no effect of television cameras on oral questions, other countries may. In short, the apparent absence of television camera-driven personalisation in Canada (in the form of leader participation, at least) does not mean that there has been no personalisation in legislatures anywhere. Given the relative lack of study of the impact of television cameras within legislatures, there remains a considerable amount of work to be done assessing where and when effects do exist, if at all.

Finally, we want to make clear that our results do not mean that leaders in Canada do not matter. Rather, it seems clear that Canadian party leaders matter a great deal comparatively speaking, and that they have mattered a great deal for quite some time. Indeed, it is possible that the role of leaders in legislative debate

matters much less than their role in the distribution of power in legislative politics more generally.[8]

Our interest here lies in whether television affects legislative behaviour, in particular, the prominence of leaders in oral questions. From this perspective, our results are somewhat unexpected. Simply put, televising debates in the House of Commons does not appear to have radically transformed the extent to which party leaders participate. We expect that these results are important not just for those interested in the Canadian case, but for those interested in the effects of televising legislative debate elsewhere as well.

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