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TV DEBATES OF THE 2020 SEIMAS ELECTIONS: STRATEGIC USES OF ISSUE ATTENTION AND FRAMING

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Abstract. *It was analysed national televised debates of the 2020 Lithuanian parliamentary elections to study how politicians use strategies of issue attention control and framing in order to be able to present their preferred ideas and positions in spite of the strict agenda control imposed by the TV moderators. Results of the analysis show that certain topics (Environment, Agriculture) despite the possible strategies to bring them on the agenda were rarely discussed during the debates as they were not presented by the moderators. This finding suggests that media agenda power is substantial and has important implications for inclusiveness of political discussions.*

Keywords: *TV debates, national elections, issue framing, agenda-setting, Lithuanian parliament*

Reikšminiai žodžiai: *televizijos debatai, nacionaliniai rinkimai, klausimų įrėminimas, darbotvarkės nustatymas, Lietuvos parlamentas*

Introduction

National election debates on TV are still an important venue for parties to present their ideological and policy positions as TV remains among the most important sources of information (for importance of information sources in the Lithuanian context, see Rinkos tyrimų centras, 2021). Spectators of these debates may even have rational explanation for viewing them – they may expect to learn about party policy positions and views of the most important participants in a very concise and interactive form (see Benoit, Hansen 2001). More importantly, these debates represent a special form of a political event during electoral campaigns which are quite distinct from campaign rallies, TV and internet ads, or meetings with voters. The two most different features are media control of the debates' agenda and direct confrontation of participating politicians with their opponents. Usually, electoral debates on TV are highly structured in order to make sure that all the participants have equal opportunity to express their ideas and respond to criticisms by the opponents. Therefore, moderators of these debates set and control the agenda – who and how much can talk and on which topics (questions). As the time allocated for these debates is rather limited and the number of participants is rather high (at least, in the context of multi-party parliamentary elections), opportunities to present the most important ideas for parties and their representatives are also quite limited.

To be sure, even the smallest, radical and marginal parties are able to participate in these debates as electoral rules require to give the floor to all the legally recognized participants of the political campaign. However, the question remains do parties have real opportunities to present the ideas that are important for them. Since debate topics are controlled by the TV hosts, some parties may be disadvantaged in terms of the selected topics (empirical studies show that some parties are viewed by the voters as "owning" certain issues, see Petrocik et al. 2003). For example, green parties may never get a chance to talk about

climate change or green economy, if TV moderators do not set this topic on the debate agenda. Thus, the first question that this article asks – do parties get to talk on a broad range of topics during the national election debates on TV?

On the other hand, empirical studies in the American context show that even if the substantive agenda of the televised political debates is set and controlled by the media, politicians are still able to raise other topics and otherwise present ideas important to them (see, for example, Boydstun et al. 2013a, Rossiter 2021). The two most important strategies used for this purpose are control of issue attention and issue framing. The first strategy implies that politicians participating in the political debates choose to speak "off topic" – either "raise some very different and more important topic" or "change slightly the topic to the one more pressing or relevant in the situation". So, for example, politician asked by moderators to express their opinion on the country's readiness to respond to military aggression, may choose to divert issue attention and proclaim that this issue is much less important than improving the standard of living for the poor or to claim that the country is a member of a strong military alliance and it only needs to make sure that the alliance is working effectively. Thus, moderators and politicians can play a certain "game" of issue agenda control to the extent that moderators allow politicians to diverge from the topic set before them. However, it needs to be seen to what extent politicians are able (or inclined) to use this opportunity in practice.

Another strategy is used when a speaker stays "on topic", however, contextualizes it in a certain way. This strategy is commonly called framing (Entman 1993) and is rather well-researched in various disciplines from political science to media studies. In this case speaker's attention shifts to how topics are presented and talked about. Therefore, strategies of framing allow speakers of the televised national political debates to stay "on topic" set by the TV hosts and at the same time discuss this topic on the terms that they want to. For example, one politician may speak about the need to increase funding for primary education and another may insist on upholding traditional values in the curricula of primary education. Thus, both speakers talk about primary education, however, they stress different aspects of it: economic vs. moral. Framing seems to be an easier strategy for a speaker wishing to stress ideas that are most relevant for them in the context of highly structured political debates. However, it remains to be investigated to what extent politicians use certain framing strategies "across-topics", which may be considered as their strategy of developing a more coherent profile and stress some unique aspects of multiple discussed issues.

In our research we use transcripts of the national televised debates held before the 2020 Lithuanian parliamentary (Seimas) elections to study how politicians use these two strategies – issue attention control and framing – in political debates with their opponents. First, we want to investigate if debate agenda set by the media is inclusive (sufficiently diverse). Second, we are interested in the question to what extent speakers of Lithuanian televised national election debates are inclined to shift the topics from those set by moderators, is there a relationship between inclination to shift topics and parties, and which topics are abandoned more frequently than others. Third, we explore which framing strategies speakers employ and are there some of them that are more frequently used by certain parties and in the context of certain topics. Importantly, we proceed with studying not only debate strategies used by major parties of Lithuania, but also include smaller parties, which are studied much more rarely.

Electoral debates, issue agendas and framing

As early as in 1960s Schattschneider (1960) noted that success of policies and politicians in democracies depends to a large extent on how successful politicians are in defining the lines of conflict and mobilizing support for their "causes". Bringing an issue to an open debate is of utmost importance as it is the first step in a long chain of steps before the decision about the issue can be made. Therefore, political opponents are keen on redrawing the lines of conflict and bringing issues important to them to the public debate. Importantly, there is strong empirical evidence that issue ownership (Petrocik 1996) allows politicians to win votes in the elections (Druckman 2004). Consequently, pushing an issue on the political

agenda is an important aspect of both day-to-day politics (say, in the parliament discussions) as well as of more specifically oriented political campaigns, such as political debates during the electoral campaigns.

However, televised national electoral debates are quite different contexts wherein politicians have to operate compared to usual campaign work when they can freely select strategies of communicating ideas, positions and images. These debates are very challenging as politicians are presented with sometimes quite specific questions "on the spot" and cannot provide a fully premeditated answer. Also, the time devoted for answering the questions is very limited (a couple of minutes at most). Thus, a politician has to react quickly and present a coherent answer that contains important message and is attractive to voters. In addition, moderators of these debates are trying hard to enforce the rules – time and content constraints, – and opponents are keen on criticizing the ideas expressed. All in all, presenting elaborate and relevant political ideas (to them and their audiences) is quite a difficult task for politicians participating in the national political debates.

However, politicians employ strategies that allow them to push through their agendas in spite of the harsh environment of televised debating. First, they may fight for agenda control, that is, to deliberately deviate from the topic presented by the moderator of the debates and talk about another issue. This strategy seems to be disrespecting both TV hosts as well as spectators, however, evidence shows that it may be acceptable to voters if the topic is changed with the one more relevant to them (Boydstun et al. 2013b). Therefore, deliberately changing the topic in the context of political debates may be considered as a normal practice and not punishable, which in turn presents opportunities for politicians to more easily control their issue agenda. Moreover, change of discussion topic is a matter of degree. One can diverge "just a little" (teacher salaries in primary education vs. secondary education), and one can engage onto a completely different topic (defence spending vs. education spending). All in all, control of debate topics may be a difficult endevour as direct "dialogue" is often avoided and "each disputant decides what is relevant, what ought to be responded to, and what themes to emphasize" (Riker 1996: 83-84).

Second most relevant strategy to be employed by politicians in the televised electoral debates is that of issue (topic) framing. Topics presented by moderators during the televised debates are rather broad so it would be able for politicians to "debate and present position" on then, not just provide a one-sentence answer. Thus, in addition to choosing whether to stay on debate topic or not (and, if not, which topic to address instead), politicians may also decide which aspect of the topic to talk about. The process of emphasizing a particular aspect of an issue (topic) is known to political communication researchers as framing, also sometimes called the second-level agenda setting (McCombs 2004). It is associated with selecting "a few elements of perceived reality and assembling a narrative that highlights connections among them to promote a particular interpretation" (Entman, 2007). Framing is studied across all the disciplines of the social sciences, where, for example, researchers explore "how news media shape debate around policy issues by deciding what aspects of an issue to emphasize, and what to exclude" (Card et al. 2015). Theories of framing claim that constant processes of issue framing produce thematic sets of interrelated ideas, which tend to become persistent and coherent over time. Therefore, these "bundles" (issues surrounded by frames) are readily "thrown in" when necessary by politicians in order to stress some aspects of debated issues (topics). Thus, again stressing aspects relevant for politicians and their audiences might be rather easy even in the highly structured electoral debates.

In what follows we analyse national televised debates of the 2020 Lithuanian Seimas elections with the focus on studying how politicians use issue attention control and issue framing in order to present their preferred ideas and policy positions in the context of highly structured debates. First, we investigate if agenda set by the media during the debates is sufficiently inclusive. Second, we explore the extent to which speakers are prone to divert from the topic set by debate moderators, and the relationships between inclination to shift topics and party identity as well as debate topic itself. Third, we explore which framing strategies politicians use most frequently and can bundles of intertwined topics and frames can be identified as well as which parties are more likely to use certain frames more frequently than other ones.

Data and Methods

In order to investigate our research questions we chose to analyse the debates held on the Lithuanian National Radio and Television (LRT) before the 2020 Seimas elections, in which representatives of candidate (party) lists competing in the multi-member electoral district participated:[1] 12 approximately one hour debates broadcasted between September 9, 2020 and September 30, 2020 (see Table A1a and A1b in the Online appendices[2] for more detailed information). The debates were automatically transcribed with the transcription tool LiST[3] developed for the Lithuanian language and then human corrected in order to make them more linguistically accurate.[4] The goal was not to produce the best possible and detailed transcription, but to correct it in order to be readable and understandable, so that topics and frames could be coded.

Representatives of each candidate (party) list (leader and the supporting team, members of which could be summoned to answer particular question by the leader) participated 4 times in the debates and 2225 speeches/turns were identified as made by the moderators and politicians.[5] We eliminated speeches/turns that were made by the moderators from the substantive analysis (however, these speeches/turns were used for identifying debate topics). Also, we eliminated speeches/turns made by politicians wherein they asked their team members to answer questions, make remarks or discussed proceeding of the debates with the moderators. Overall, 1030 of "substantive" speeches/turns made by politicians during the debates on the LRT were employed in the substantive analysis stage (see Table 1).

Table 1. *Characteristics of the 2020 Seimas election candidate (party) list debates held on the LRT.*

Characteristic	N
Overall speeches/turns by politicians and moderators	2225
Total speeches/turns by politicians (substantive and non-substantive)	1337
Substantive speeches/turns by politicians	1030
Topics	79
Debates	12

The general organization of the debates was highly structured. The moderator announced the topic (question) of the debates and each party representative had one minute to speak on it (answer it). The timing of introductory answers was closely controlled by the moderators. After a round of introductory speeches (answer), party representatives had another round (usually, of about half a minute) for making remarks and replies to criticisms form the opponents. However, some debates became very heated and

[1] There were also debates held for single-member electoral districts on the LRT as well as three debates held on the private TV channel LNK where representatives of candidate (party) list participated. However, these debates were substantively different in terms of organisation and participants from the debates analysed and, therefore, were not included into the sample in order to keep it more internally uniform.

[2] Online appendices to this article are available on the Open Science Framework database: *https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/XJW4Y*.

[3] Description of the tool developed by the Vytautas Magnus University team under the auspices of the project www.semantika.lt is available here: *https://bitbucket.org/airenas/list/src*.

[4] Author would like to thank research assistant Paulius Vijeikis for correcting the remaining errors of the automatic transcription.

[5] In general, only speaker change was used as indication of turn change. However, we also used speakers' explicit mentions of speaking "on another aspect" (that is when they explicitly stated in their speeches: "and now…", "on the other hand…", "the other thing…" etc.) for additionally identifying turns.

lasted much longer than planned by the TV hosts. The average number of substantive speeches/turns made by a party was 60.4 (ranging from 49 made by TS-LKD to 72 made by KS, LSDDP and NS, see Table A1b in the Online appendices).[6] The average number of substantive speeches/turns per separate debate topic was 13.04 (ranging from 5 on Health to 35 on Defence, see Table A1a in the Online appendices).

The coding unit was speech/turn made by a politician and two aspects of these speeches/turns were manually coded for the purpose of this article: topics and frames. For coding debate and speaker topics[7] we used a scheme developed for analysing agenda dynamics in public discourse and usually referred to as the Comparative Agendas Project (CAP) scheme or master codebook (see Baumgartner 2019). It was applied for coding numerous and diverse political texts and the descriptions of the codes used are available on the official website of the project (see www.comparativeagendas.net/pages/master-codebook). The most recent version of the scheme was adopted to be comparable across countries and currently consists of 21 major topics (see the list in the Online appendices) and 220 minor topics (subtopics, see the link above for detailed description)[8]. Coding was performed on the subtopic level as it allows to collect coding on a broader level of major topics.

For coding of frames we adapted a scheme developed for coding frames in the televised 2008 US Presidential election debates (Boydstun et al. 2013b). Originally, 8 frames were identified for the American context: Moral, Constitutionality/Legality, Economic, Safety, Bureaucratic/Logistical, Political, Effectiveness, and Patriotism. However, Lithuanian realities, such as, post-soviet transition, becoming an independent state and a member of the European Union, seem to be not covered by these rather general frames. Therefore, for the purposes of this study we introduced 7 additional frames: Decentralization, Populism[9], Pro-Western, Anti-Western, Foreign practices, Personal experiences[10], and Soviet legacies (see detailed definitions and examples in the Online appendices).[11]

Analysis of the coded material was mostly descriptive, employing methods of descriptive statistical analysis. However, we also used correspondence analysis (CA) in order to be able to better visually portray relationships between two categorical variables with many value categories. CA is a descriptive statistical technique for visualising data of cross-tabulation of two categorical variables by calculating coordinates representing both its rows and columns and displaying these coordinates in the biplot[12]. The coordinates are analogous to loadings in a principal components analysis except that they partition the Chi-square value used in testing independence of row and column variable categories instead of the total variance. Dimensions of the resulting biplot are seldom interpreted, as they represent two separate "spaces" (constructed for categories of row and column variables), and singular definition of axes (dimensions) is difficult[13]. More usual practice is to investigate which categories are opposed one to another on the dimensions for the two variables separately and then describe the structure of the distribution of points. Importantly, distances between the points of categories of a single variable on the biplot represent Chi-square (and not

[6] It was not possible to identify the party that a speaker belonged to in case of 4 speeches/turns.

[7] The debate topic is the one announced by the moderator of the debates and the speaker topic is a topic that politician talks about. Debate topics were the same for all the speeches/turns of politician between the two announcements of topics made by the moderators.

[8] In addition, category "98 Other/Vague topic" was employed for coding speeches/turns that were very general in nature and it was not possible to determine which specific CAP topic they belong to.

[9] Populism constitutes one of the frames that is becoming more and more relevant for the study of politics around the world (see Aslanidis 2016).

[10] Though this frame is not related to political realities of any particular country, it was somehow missed in the original frame coding scheme.

[11] Full coding results are available on the Dataverse repository of the Lithuanian Data Archive for Social Sciences and Humanities (Ramonaitė et al., 2026).

[12] For comprehensive introductions into CA see Greenacre (2017) and Husson, Le and Pagès (2017).

[13] Simultaneous display of the two "spaces" is possible because their origins (for categories of row and column variables) coincide and the variations, called inertias in the context of CA (both total and for each separate dimension), are the same.

Euclidean) distances and, therefore, are quite abstract quantities. Spatial locations of categories of variables provide visual picture of the pattern of relationship between the variables analysed. For categories of separate variables, the angle between the origin and the two points (categories) is most important. If the angle is small (close to 0°), the two categories are positively related. If the angle is 90°, the two categories are unrelated. And if angle is 180° (they are opposite each other on the biplot), the two categories are negatively related. Also, the more distant the points representing categories are from the origin, the more distinctive they are from the average profile. Therefore, points close to the origin of the biplot are not very interesting for the interpretation of CA results. All in all, it is important to note that all the results of CA are relative, that is, they have to be interpreted taking into consideration all the categories of both variables not just few selected ones.

In addition to descriptive statistical analysis we also employed a test of association called v-test, in order to evaluate the statistical significance of relationship between separate categories of variables. The details of calculating the test estimates for categories of categorical variables and evaluating their statistical significance are described in a book by Husson, Le and Pagès (2017: 154-157). All the statistical analyses were performed with *R* software environment for statistical computing and graphics (R Core Team, 2020) and for performing CA analysis and v-tests functions *CA()* and *catdes()* included into the *FactoMineR* package (version 2.3, see Le et al. 2008) were employed.

Results

First, we investigated the topics introduced by the TV hosts during the televised national electoral debates of 2020 looking for dominant and marginal topics. We then compared distributions of topics set for the debates by media representatives and topics actually discussed by the speakers in order to find relative congruence or incongruence (trends of speaking "on" and "off" topic) as well as trying to identify which exact topics were discussed more and less frequently, and which parties deviated most from the debate topics set by the media representatives.

Table 2. *Topics discussed during the 2020 Seimas elections debates on the LRT (CAP topics, 2 digits).*

Debate topics	N (debates)	% from total debates (79)	N (substantive speeches/turns)	% from substantive speeches/turns (1030)
1 Macroeconomics	2	2.5	19	1.8
2 Civil rights	11	13.9	140	13.6
3 Health	15	19.0	174	16.9
4 Agriculture	0	0.0	0	0.0
5 Labour	5	6.3	54	5.2
6 Education	15	19.0	198	19.2
7 Environment	0	0.0	0	0.0
8 Energy	1	1.3	9	0.9
9 Immigration	1	1.3	10	1.0
10 Transportation	0	0.0	0	0.0

Debate topics	N (debates)	% from total debates (79)	N (substantive speeches/turns)	% from substantive speeches/turns (1030)
12 Family, law and crime	10	12.7	189	18.3
13 Social welfare	13	16.5	98	9.5
14 Housing and development	0	0.0	0	0.0
15 Domestic commerce	0	0.0	0	0.0
16 Defence	6	7.6	119	11.6
17 Science and technology	2	2.5	21	2.0
18 Foreign trade	1	1.3	6	0.6
19 International affairs	7	8.9	80	7.8
20 Government operations	4	5.1	49	4.8
21 Public lands	0	0.0	0	0.0
23 Culture	0	0.0	0	0.0

Note: some debates discussed multiple topics: twelve – 2 topics and one – 3 topics.

As it can be seen from Table 2 the most discussed topics during the 2020 Seimas elections debates on the LRT were Health and Education (19.0 % of debates) followed by Social welfare (16.5 %), Civil rights (13.9 %) and Family, law and crime (12.7 %). Importantly, there were no debates held on Agriculture, Environment, Transportation, Housing and development, Domestic commerce, Public lands, and Culture. Therefore, for parties that may have been targeting these topics during the campaign (or in general) it might have been more difficult to bring them on the agenda of the TV debates. This potential media agenda-setting bias is further reflected in the absolute and relative distributions of topics that were discussed during the substantive speeches/turns of politicians (see Table 3).

Table 3. *Speakers' topics discussed during the 2020 Seimas elections debates on the LRT (CAP topics, 2 digits).*

Speakers' topics	N	% from topics mentioned	% from substantive speeches/turns (1030)
1 Macroeconomics	27	2.3	2.6
2 Civil rights	119	10.0	11.6
3 Health	158	13.3	15.3
4 Agriculture	6	0.5	0.6
5 Labour	46	3.9	4.5
6 Education	180	15.1	17.5
7 Environment	3	0.3	0.3

Speakers' topics	N	% from topics mentioned	% from substantive speeches/turns (1030)
8 Energy	8	0.7	0.8
9 Immigration	7	0.6	0.7
10 Transportation	0	0.0	0.0
12 Family, law and crime	167	14.0	16.2
13 Social welfare	101	8.5	9.8
14 Housing and development	6	0.5	0.6
15 Domestic commerce	7	0.6	0.7
16 Defense	93	7.8	9.0
17 Science and technology	16	1.3	1.6
18 Foreign trade	1	0.1	0.1
19 International affairs	93	7.8	9.0
20 Government operations	103	8.6	10.0
21 Public lands	2	0.2	0.2
23 Culture	1	0.1	0.1
98 Other/Vague topic	48	4.0	4.7

As expected topics of Education, Family, law and crime, Health, Civil rights, and Social welfare were discussed most frequently during the debates. Topic of Government operations was among the topics that were introduced into the debates by the speakers relatively more frequently than it could have been expected from distribution of debates topics (see Table 2). Topics of Agriculture, Environment, Transportation, Housing and development, Domestic commerce, Public lands, and Culture were almost or completely absent from the debates. Moreover, topics of Energy, Immigration, Science and technology, and Foreign trade were introduced int the debates very rarely (as it could have been expected from the distribution of debate topics, see Table 2). Therefore, the results of this study give substantial support for the claim that media agenda-setting power is substantial in shaping the list of topics that are discussed during the political debates on TV. This finding is corroborated by the observation that during the debates the moderators were actively forcing politicians to speak "on topic", made remarks about the contents of their speeches, and in some cases even tried to perform "fact-checking" function.

On the other hand, deviations from the topics suggested by the hosts of the televised 2020 Seimas elections debates were substantial, at least, if inspected on the more detailed level (3 digits CAP topics). As it can be seen in Table 4 almost a third (30.6 %) of substantive speeches/turns of politicians were off the debate topic. However, if looked on a more general level (2 digits CAP topics) the deviations were less substantial as only more than every 6th (17.6 %) substantive speech/turn during the debates was off topic. This proportion again reaffirms the finding that politicians during the the 2020 Seimas elections debates on the LRT stayed on topic most of the time. And if they deviated, these deviations frequently were "within" a more general topic rather than a complete turn to some other substantially different topic. Moreover, instances of deliberately speaking off topic were usually negotiated with the moderator or made during the

time of replies/remarks. As it was already mentioned, moderators were rather keen on controlling politicians to stay on topic, especially, during the first round of answering the introduced questions.

Finally, politicians also used time of their substantive speeches/turns to introduce "additional" topics to the main debate topics introduced by the TV hosts. This strategy constituted from 10 to 15 percent of total substantive speeches/turns during the debates depending on how detailed analysis is performed (2 or 3 digits CAP topic level). All in all, in only slightly more than 1 out of 4 speeches/turns politicians either talked on some substantially different topic than presented by the TV hosts or introduced additional, quite different topic (therefore, only partially deviating from the set topic).

Table 4. *Speaking on and off topic during the 2020 Seimas elections debates on the LRT (CAP topics, 2 and 3 digits).*

Topic consistency	CAP (3 digits)		CAP (2 digits)	
	N	%	N	%
Not on topic	315	30.6%	181	17.6%
Also other topic	151	14.7%	107	10.4%
Just on topic	564	54.8%	742	72.0%
Total	1030	100.0%	1030	100.0%

We also looked into which parties (their representatives) were more and less prone to deviate form the topics set by the TV hosts during the debates. As expected from previous theoretical insights suggesting that populist and radical parties are more keen on bringing their specific issue agendas into political campaigns (see, for example, Mudde 2010), results of correspondence analysis (see Figure 1) indeed show that populist radical right parties were more inclined to introduce topics other than those set by the TV hosts. Statistical significance analysis results (see Table A2 in the Online appendices) showed that representatives of Centre Party – Nationalists (CP-T, v-test=4.045, $p<0.05$), National Alliance (NS, v-test=2.556, $p<0.05$), and Lithuanian People's Party (LLP, v-test=2.368, $p<0.05$) were more prone to completely change the topic during their substantive speeches/turns. However, other populist movements, as for example, Christian Union (KS), Union of Solidarity between the Generations – Rally for Lithuania (KSS-SL), and Political Party the Way of Courage (DKPP) did not statistically significantly more frequently debated off topic. Interestingly, the major ruling party – Lithuanian Farmers and Greens Union (LVŽS) – was also relatively more frequently debating off topic. This finding may be related the inclination of the governmental parties to speak on the topics that they think reflect their achievements while in office, even if they are not introduced by the TV hosts. Indeed, the narrative of "achievements" was prominent in quite a number of the speeches made by the representatives of the governing parties.

Only the Homeland Union – Lithuanian Christian Democrats (TS-LKD) – the major opposition party – could be identified as statistically significantly more frequently introducing additional topics to the debates (v-test=1.852, $p<0.1$). On the other hand, Social Democratic Party of Lithuania (LSDP, v-test=3.392, $p<0.05$), Party Lithuania – For everyone (PLT, v-test=2.880, $p<0.05$), and Labour Party (DP, v-test=2.322, $p<0.05$) were the parties that stayed on the debate topics set by the TV hosts relatively more frequently than it could be expected. Also, Freedom Party (LP) – newly established liberal arty – was not prone to debate off topic (reverse relationship, v-test=-2.102, $p<0.05$). All in all, we found evidence to support the idea that the inclination to deviate from the agenda set by the media is associated with the profiles of the parties. However, further in depth research is needed in this area.

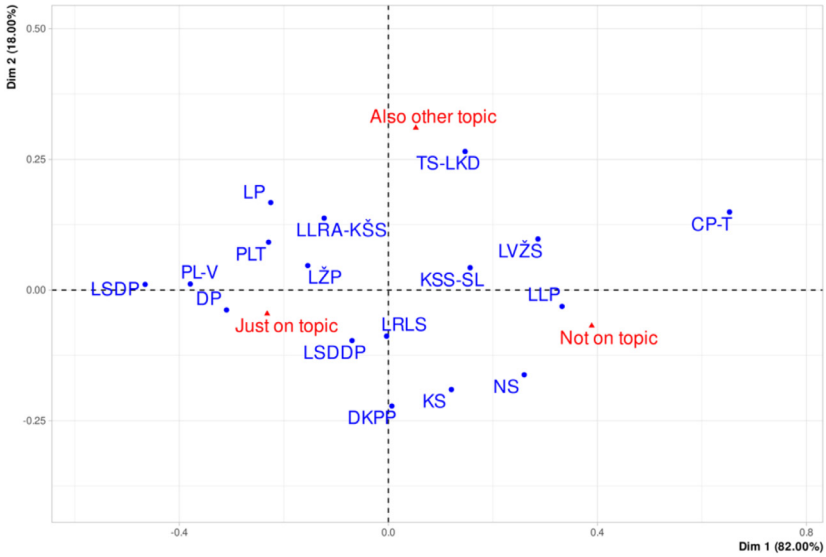

Figure 1. *Deviations from debate topics (CAP topics, 2 digits) by parties during the 2020 Seimas elections debates on the LRT: biplot of correspondence analysis results (standard coordinates, symmetric normalization).*

Further, we investigated which were the debates topics that politicians were more prone to deviate from during the 2020 Seimas elections debates on the LRT. Correspondence analysis results (see Figure 2) showed that measured on the more detailed level (3 digit CAP topics), some deviations and non-devations from speaking on debate topics set by the TV hosts were associated with subcategories from the same broader topic category. For example, subtopic Education: Excellence is statistically significantly related with more frequently speaking off topic and subtopics Education: Elementary & secondary and Education: Higher are statistically significantly related with more frequently speaking just on topic. Therefore, analysis on the more general level that is usually performed in empirical studies of agenda topics (see, for example, Boydstun et al. 2013a) might be misleading in our case.

Examining statistical significance analysis results we see that on the more detailed level (see Table A3 in the Online appendices) we see that politicians were most prone to stay on debate topic when they were presented issues related to Education: Elementary & secondary (v-test=5.912, $p<0.05$), Education: Higher (v-test=5.125, $p<0.05$), Government operations: General (v-test=3.522, $p<0.05$), Energy: Electricity (v-test=2.855, $p<0.05$), and Social welfare: Disabled assistance (v-test=2.043, $p<0.05$). On the other hand, politicians were most prone to change the debate topic completely when they were presented with issues related to Education: Excellence (v-test=3.788, $p<0.05$), Social welfare: Other (v-test=3.788, $p<0.05$), Civil rights: Gender Discrimination (v-test=2.553, $p<0.05$), Science and technology: R&D (v-test=2.454, $p<0.05$), Health: Manpower (v-test=2.273, $p<0.05$), Health: Insurance (v-test=2.162, $p<0.05$), and Civil rights: Minority Discrimination (v-test2.162237, $p<0.05$). In some instances politicians were inclined to speak on additional topics to the ones presented with debate topics Labour: General (v-test=3.575, $p<0.05$), Labour: Employee Benefits (v-test=2.699, $p<0.05$), Education: Other (v-test=2.653, $p<0.05$), International affairs: Specific Country (v-test=2.322, $p<0.05$), Social welfare: Low-Income Assistance (v-test=2.055, $p<0.05$), Foreign trade: Private Investments (v-test=1.995, $p<0.05$), and International Affairs: General (v-test=1.962, $p<0.05$). To be sure, just a small part from the pool of all subtopics available in the CAP classification scheme were presented to politicians during the 2020 Seimas elections debates on the LRT. However, results show that debate topics that politicians tended to deviate from constitute a pool

of rather diverse thematic areas: Education, Social welfare, Civil rights, Health and Science and technology. Therefore, further analysis wherein the party variable is included in order to show how the relationship is influence by party identities of the speakers is necessary.

After studying which and how debate topics were discussed, we also investigated strategies of framing the issues employed by the politicians during the 2020 Seimas elections debates on the LRT. We focused here on the framing strategies used the most frequently and their associations with particular parties as well as particular debate topics. As it can be seen in Table 5, frames of Effectiveness (50.5 %), Political (29.7 %), and Economic (23.5 %) aspects of discussed issues were employed most frequently by the politicians.

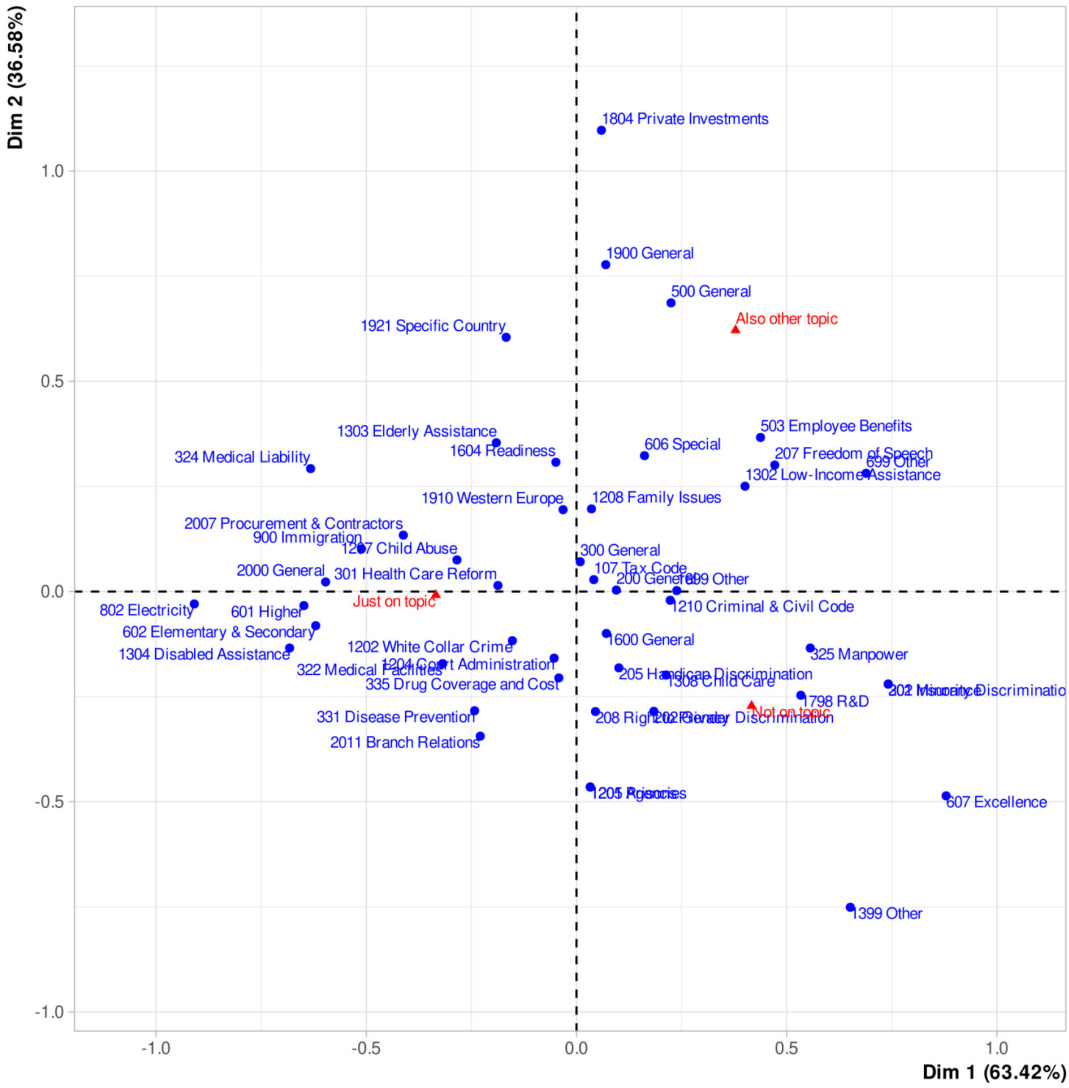

Figure 2. *Deviations from debate topics by debate topic (CAP topics, 3 digits) during the 2020 Seimas elections debates on the LRT: biplot of correspondence analysis results (standard coordinates, symmetric normalization).*

These findings suggest that basically majority of the debates were related to politicians' attempts to show how effective or ineffective certain debated policies are (or would be, if introduced), how well or bad they handled certain issues (criticizing one another), and how much policies cost or how important it is to minimize financial burden related to them. Also, substantial number of politicians' substantive speeches/turns discussed Legal and Constitutional aspects (mostly showing that some actions/policies are or could be considered not legally acceptable or even unconstitutional) of policies and actions (18.7 %). Importantly, Foreign practices and Moral aspects related to values, religion and ethics were mentioned in almost every 6th substantive speech/turn of politicians during the debates. Frequency of the former frame seems to be related to CEE politicians' inclination to measure their actions against best practices in other countries, especially, those in the Western world (see, for example, Tismaneanu 1998). Other frames were employed less frequently. Interestingly, references to Safety (external and internal) were rather infrequent (8.9 %) even in the context of ongoing pandemic. Also, results show that Populist framing and discourses in general are rather weak (only 7.9 % of speeches/turns referenced populist frames) in Lithuanian political arena (see Ramonaitė, Ratkevičiūtė 2013), and practices of discussing Soviet legacies are rather extinct (0.7 %).

Table 5. *Frames employed during the 2020 Seimas elections debates on the LRT.*

Frame	N	% from frames mentioned	% from substantive speeches/turns (1030)
Moral	157	7.8	15.2
Constitutionality/Legality	193	9.6	18.7
Economic	242	12.1	23.5
Safety	92	4.6	8.9
Bureaucratic/Logistical	122	6.1	11.8
Political	306	15.3	29.7
Effectiveness	520	26.0	50.5
Patriotism	42	2.1	4.1
Decentralization	24	1.2	2.3
Populism	81	4.0	7.9
Pro-Western	10	0.5	1.0
Anti-Western	11	0.6	1.1
Foreign practices	149	7.4	14.5
Personal experiences	48	2.4	4.7
Soviet legacies	7	0.4	0.7

We further looked into how parties used the frames[14] when debating on TV during the 2020 Seimas elections campaign. Results of correspondence analysis (see Figure 3) indicate that more frequent use of certain frames might be related to specific parties. For example, populist frame was more frequently

[14] Further analysis excluded frames of Decentralization, Pro- and Anti-Western stance as well as those related to Soviet legacies as they were found in less than 3% of substantive speeches/turns made by politicians. The low percentages of cases of these frames might have produced unreliable results of statistical analyses.

(than by an "average" party) used by National Alliance (NS, v-test=4.613, p<0.05)[15], Lithuanian People's Party (LLP, v-test=3.511, p<0.05), and Union of Solidarity between the Generations – Rally for Lithuania (KSS-SL, v-test=2.171, while it was never employed by Lithuanian Green Party (LŽP) and Social Democratic Labour Party of Lithuania (LSDDP), Homeland Union – Lithuanian Christian Democrats (TS-LKD), and Party Freedom and Justice (PLT). Economic frame was used by all the parties and only Electoral Action of Poles in Lithuania – Christian Families Alliance (LLRA-KŠS, v-test=2.091, p<0.05) stood out as more prone to employ it on average. Moral frame was more frequently used by Christian Union (KS, v-test=4.321, p<0.05), Union of Solidarity between the Generations – Rally for Lithuania (KSS-SL, v-test=2.453, p<0.05), and Electoral Action of Poles in Lithuania – Christian Families Alliance (LLRA-KŠS, v-test=2.420, p<0.05). All these latter parties had a very clear focus on family and traditional values during the whole campaign and the results of this study just confirmed it.

Frame of effectiveness was used most frequently during the debates overall, however, there were two parties – Freedom Party (LP, v-test=2.908, p<0.05) and Lithuanian Green Party (LŽP, v-test=1.992, p<0.05) – that used it even more frequently (in relative terms). Patriotism frame was more frequently used by Christian Union (KS, v-test=2.297, p<0.05) and Lithuanian People's Party (LLP, v-test=2.130, p<0.05). Foreign practices were more frequently mentioned by Party Lithuania – For everyone (PL-V, v-test=3.160, p<0.05) and Union of Solidarity between the Generations – Rally for Lithuania (KSS-SL, v-test=2.427, p<0.05), while Personal experiences of party representatives or people they met by Centre Party – Nationalists (CP-T, v-test=2.804, p<0.05), Labour Party (DP, v-test=2.500, p<0.05), and Christian Union (KS, v-test=2.013, p<0.05).

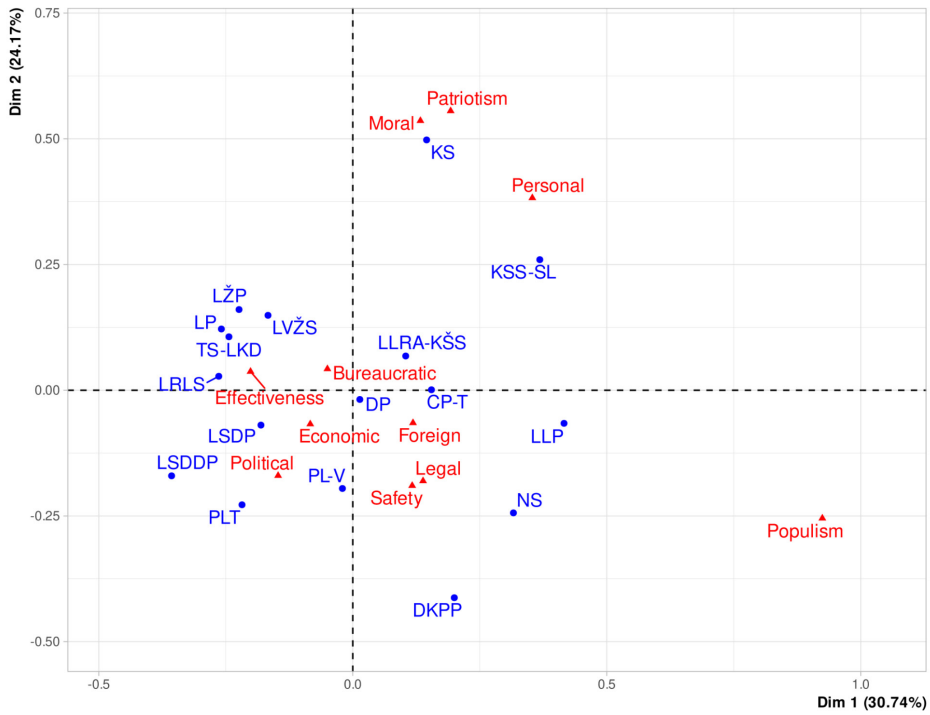

Figure 3. *Frame use by parties during the 2020 Seimas elections debates on the LRT: biplot of correspondence analysis results (standard coordinates, symmetric normalization).*

[15] See Table A4 in the Online appendices for the extended results of statistical significance analysis.

All in all, it could be said that radical right parties were more frequently employing frames related to their party profiles: Populism, Moral and Personal experience. Congruence of party profiles and framing strategies during highly structured political debates might be considered as a reflection of realized available opportunities of promoting ideas most relevant for the parties.

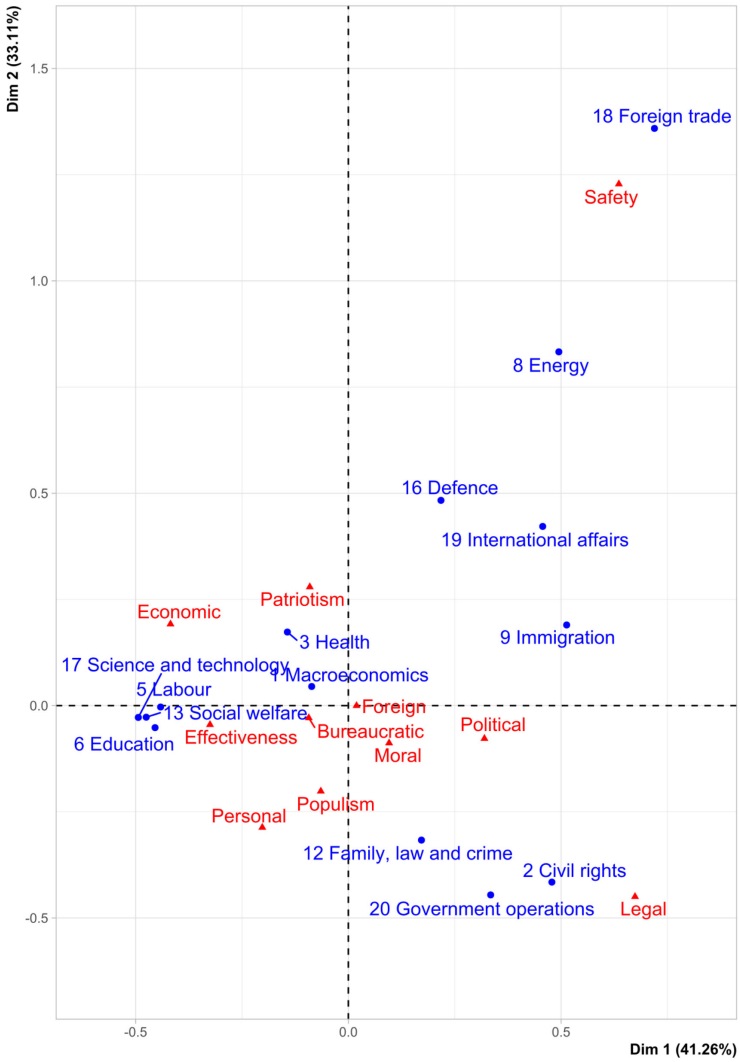

Figure 4. *Association of frames and debate topics (CAP topics, 2 digits) during the 2020 Seimas elections debates on the LRT: biplot of correspondence analysis results (standard coordinates, symmetric normalization).*

Finally, we studied how the debate topics were framed during the 2020 Seimas elections debates on the national television. As it can be seen in Figure 4, some frames very distinctively used together with certain topics. Safety frame was most strongly associated with majors CAP topics Defence (v-test=6.295,

p<0.05)[16], International affairs (v-test=5.887, p<0.05), Foreign trade (v-test=3.973, p<0.05), Energy (v-test=3.096083, p<0.05), and Health (v-test=2.228, p<0.05). Legal/Constitutional frame was relatively more frequently employed when discussing majors CAP topics Civil rights (v-test=7.095, p<0.05), Family, law and crime (v-test=4.672, p<0.05), and Government operations (v-test=3.696, p<0.05). Among the most frequently employed frames Effectiveness frame was associated with major debate topics Education (v-test=6.085, p<0.05), Social welfare (v-test=3.021, p<0.05), and Health (v-test=2.469, p<0.05), Economic frame was related to major debate topics (Labour (v-test=4.081, p<0.05), Social welfare (v-test=3.657, p<0.05), Health (v-test=2.398, p<0.05), and Science and technology (v-test=2.239, p<0.05), and Political frame was more frequently employed when debating on Civil rights (v-test=3.800, p<0.05), Family, law and crime (v-test=2.370, p<0.05), and Defence (v-test=2.201, p<0.05). Interestingly, Populist frame did not have a distinct topic that it could be considered to be more intensely related to. All in all, these findings suggest that similar to what was found in the case of party and framing relationship, certain topics attracted specific strategies of framing during the 2020 Seimas election debates. These relationships appear to be somewhat expected, as Safety frame is related to "obvious candidate" topics Defence, International affairs, Foreign trade, Energy, and Health. In a similar vein, Legality/Constitutionality frame is related to topics Civil rights, Family, law and crime, and Government operations. Therefore, frames seem to be more "fitted" to the topics than "cut-across" the topics. This once again shows the importance of agenda setting – topics "attract" frames and control of agenda with regard to topics discussed allows to control the use of frames. Thus, control of topics discussed during highly structured televised political debates might also be conducive to frame bias.

Discussion and conclusions

Results of the analysis of the televised 2020 Seimas election debates showed that in highly organized and structured setting, such as political debates on the national television, politicians have little space for strategic maneuvers in order to present ideas important for their political campaigns. This is especially true of the thematic focus, as moderators of the debates set the thematic agendas and try to enforce them as much as possible. Therefore, in majority of cases politicians have to talk about issues and topics that moderators set them to talk about. This leaves certain topics not covered during the debates that may be relevant for some participants of the debates. However, politicians are more free to selects the frames that better suit their ideological and policy orientations when they talk about the topics forced on them by the TV hosts. This strategy may be identified as most dominant with regard to highly structured debates as those held on the LRT before the 2020 Seimas elections.

Results of the study showed that highly structured debates of the 2020 Seimas elections favored certain thematic areas and included some topics while excluded others. Thus, topics of Education, Family, law and crime, Health, Civil rights, and Social welfare were discussed very frequently, while topics of Agriculture, Environment, Transportation, Housing and development, Domestic commerce, Public lands, Culture, Energy, Immigration, Science and technology, and Foreign trade were barely mentioned. Moreover, politicians' deviations (full or partial, looked on more general level) from the topic set by the TV hosts were observed in only slightly more than 1 out of 4 speeches/turns. These findings indicate that even the purposefully rigid and equal-opportunity encouraging setup of political debates introduces substantive bias in terms of topics discussed. In a short period of time that is available for the national electoral debates on TV some topics cannot be discussed and media decides which of them are discussed. This may introduce bias as some parties are viewed by electorate as owning certain issues (Banda, 2021; Stubager, Seeberg, 2016). Therefore, not being able to discuss "their" issues during the debates these parties may appear as less competent, relevant or reliable for the voters. This seems to have been especially important in cases of Lithuanian Green Party (pro-environmental party) and Electoral Action of Poles in Lithuania – Christian

[16] See Table A5 in the Online appendices for the extended results of statistical significance analysis.

Families Alliance (ethnic minority party), as topics of Environment and Minority Discrimination were almost or completely left out of the debates discourse. However, the results also showed that representatives of populist radical right parties and the major ruling party were those that were most inclined to deviate from debating on the topics set by the TV hosts. Therefore, we found evidence to support the claims that inclination to deviate from the political debates agenda set by the media is associated with the profiles of the parties.

Results also indicated that debate topics that politicians tended to deviate from, constituted a pool of rather diverse thematic areas: Education, Social welfare, Civil rights, Health and Science and technology. Importantly, analysis at the most detailed thematic level showed that some deviations and non-devations from speaking on debate topics set by the TV hosts were associated with subcategories from the same broader topic category. Therefore, analysis on the rather general level that is usually performed in empirical studies (see Boydstun et al. 2013a) might not be the best choice of an analytical unit.

Since the 2020 Seimas election debates on the national television were very structured and moderators tried hard to enforce the agenda politicians used various frames to contextualize their speeches. It can be said that most of the debates were related to politicians' attempts to show how effective or ineffective (Effectiveness frame) some policies are (or would be, if introduced), how well or bad they handled certain issues (criticizing one another) (Political frame), and how much policies cost or how important it is to minimize financial burden related to them (Economic frame). Also, substantial amount of politicians' speeches/turns discussed legal and constitutional aspects of policies and actions. Importantly, foreign practices and moral aspects related to values, religion and ethics were mentioned in almost every 6th substantive speech/turn of politicians during the debates. And frames of post-soviet legacies, patriotism and populism were rarely employed.

We discovered a certain congruence of party profiles and framing strategies which might be considered as a reflection of realized available opportunities of promoting ideas most relevant for the parties via framing strategies during the highly structured televised political debates. Furthermore, it was found that relationships between the framing strategies and debates topics reflect the trend of certain "traditionalism", as Safety frame was found to be related to topics of Defence, International affairs, Foreign trade, Energy, and Health, and Legal/Constitutional frame was discovered to be associated with topics of Civil rights, Family, law and crime, and Government operations. Therefore, frames seem to be "fitted" to the topics rather than "cut-across" the topics. Since debate topics "attract" frames, control of topics discussed might be considered as a source of media bias during highly structured televised political debates.

Data Availability Statement

The data used to support the findings of this research are available on the Dataverse repository of the Lithuanian Data Archive for Social Sciences and Humanities (LiDA): *https://hdl.handle.net/21.12137/HAYYBG*.

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2020 M. SEIMO RINKIMŲ TELEVIZIJOS DEBATAI: STRATEGINIS TEMŲ IR JŲ ĮRĖMINIMO NAUDOJIMAS

Anotacija. *Šiame straipsnyje analizuojami 2020 m. Lietuvos Respublikos Seimo rinkimų televizijos debatai siekiant ištirti, kaip politikai naudoja dėmesio politiniams klausimams pritraukimo ir įrėminimo strategijas, kad galėtų pateikti savo norimas idėjas ir pozicijas nepaisant griežtos debatų darbotvarkės kontrolės, kurią vykdo televizijos debatų vedėjai. Tyrimo rezultatai parodė, kad tam tikros temos, pavyzdžiui, aplinkosauga ir žemės ūkis, buvo aptariamos retai, nors politikai turėjo galimybių pasitelkti įvairias strategijas šioms temoms įtraukti į darbotvarkę. Didžiąja dalimi taip nutiko todėl, kad šių klausimų neįtraukdavo debatų vedėjai. Tai leidžia teigti, kad žiniasklaidos galia formuojant darbotvarkę yra reikšminga ir turi svarbių pasekmių politinių diskusijų įtraukimui bei nagrinėjamų klausimų įvairovei.*

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