

Election reporting is an odd genre of journalism, and there's one phenomenon which is particularly striking: news broadcasts are suddenly filled to the brim with "ordinary people" – voters brought in for vox pop or "man on the street" interviews, expressing their feelings and opinions about the politicians and policies of the main parties.

This is strange because everyday, routine news is heavily dominated by elite sources – frequently politicians – and ordinary people get relatively little screen time. When they do, as [our research](#) has shown, they appear as child-like, self-interested consumers who can only speak authoritatively about their own personal experience, rather than express opinions on matters of political substance.

At election time, by contrast, vox pop interviews appear in most broadcasts and in significant numbers, and voters are encouraged to express their opinion on any and all developments in the campaign. For example, this week saw all the main parties launch their manifestos, and television coverage focused strongly on public reaction.

Our man in Grimsby

The Lib Dem's manifesto launch in Battersea on Wednesday was analysed by local residents, one of whom described Clegg as a "[strong force](#)" in the coalition, while students from Sussex Downs College appeared more disillusioned with the party, one of them commenting: "they're just saying everything that we want to hear, to get our vote". UKIP's manifesto received a kinder treatment by vox pop interviewees across the broadcasters.

BBC News at Six spoke to voters in Grimsby – the site of the manifesto launch. One interviewee was a fish trader, who argued: "We're a deprived town here, and UKIP are talking more sense". On the same day, ITV spoke to bingo-playing pensioners in Clacton-on-Sea – the constituency where UKIP won their first seat in parliament, and the site for the party's manifesto launch event. The pensioners turned out to be vehemently anti-immigration and overwhelmingly supportive of the party.

Similarly, when the Tories unveiled their right-to-buy scheme for Housing Association tenants on Tuesday, all the main broadcasters featured vox pops with housing association tenants. For

example, Channel 4 News interviewed Swindon Housing Association tenants, who were reluctant to be swayed by the Tory promises because, as one female interviewee said, “We don’t make enough money anyway so it won’t make a difference to us.”

The flood of vox pops is [not a new phenomenon](#), even if it may have become more prominent with initiatives like the BBC’s My Election feature, which includes a brief first-person account from a member of the public towards the end of each of their evening news programmes. On Tuesday and Wednesday this week, it featured a fishmonger and a fashion designer.

Voice of the people?

So why are vox pop interviews so popular at election time? Vox pops are used widely as a measure of public opinion. They are usually introduced by correspondents saying things like: “The mood on the streets of Grimsby is ...” or “for the voters of Clacton-on-Sea ...” Though news organisations’ guidelines are clear that they should not be treated as representative, this is frequently less apparent in the way they are used.

[BBC editorial guidelines](#), for example, caution journalists:

We should always make it clear that vox pops only represent some aspects of an argument and do not give any indication of the weight or breadth of opinion.

As Deutsche Welle put it in their [guidance](#):

A vox pop is never a representative opinion poll, but merely a random selection of responses. But as listeners love to hear what other ordinary people think, a vox pop will make any programme more lively, entertaining and credible.

This points to the fact that vox pops [serve as a gesture of inclusion](#) for broadcasters often struggling to include a variety of voices and demographics amongst their sources. As Richard

Tait, former Head of News for ITN, put it in an interview for our book, vox pops serve as “an important antidote to a world where everything is mediated through authoritative voices,” reflecting a “sense that in an age of spin, vox pops are a way of using language in a more accessible way, in terms which make more of a connection.”

Having said that, the inclusion of vox pops doesn't always provide us with a compelling view of the insights of citizens. More often than not, interviewees express disaffection with the ruling class.

In [my research](#) based on interviews with voters outside polling stations, I have found that when citizens speak about politics, they have a narrow range of discourses to draw on. In fact, the most frequent way for them to talk about politics is through expressing disenchantment with, and alienation from, the process, the politicians and the system.

Of course, vox pop interviews are not the only or even the most prominent type of reference to public opinion. When we researched types of reference to public opinion in the 2001 election, we found that by far the most common way of talking about the public opinion – accounting for 43% of all references – was through vague inferences about public opinion, such as “voters believe” or “the public mood is”. This was followed by opinion polls, which made up a third of all references, at 33%. By contrast, in [routine coverage](#) polls only made up 3% of references to public opinion.

Polls – for all their flaws – provide by far the most systematic, scientific and representative account of public opinion. Their frequent use at election time, along with that of other types of references to public opinion, such as vox pops, show us that even if citizens don't usually have much of a say about what happens in the world of politics, their views matter and are taken into consideration when they're about to vote.

This may be because accounts of public opinion contribute to predicting the likely outcome of the election, feeding into a horserace angle on the elections. But it drives home the point that in a democratic society, the views of citizens, not just politicians, shape the stories we tell ourselves about what that society should look like.

Disclosure

Election season: one of the few times we hear the voice of the people on the news

Written by The Conversation

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