

**DOING DEMOCRACY BETTER:
HOW CAN INFORMATION AND DISCOURSE
IN ELECTION AND REFERENDUM
CAMPAIGNS IN THE UK BE IMPROVED?**

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Executive Summary

This report asks: How can we improve the quality of information and discourse during election and referendum campaigns?

Voters are currently badly let down by the quality of campaign information and discourse. The report finds that it would be possible to do much better. We should be ambitious about the extent to which our democratic practice can be enriched.

The report is based on extensive research into democratic practices in the UK and elsewhere, especially Ireland, the Netherlands, Germany, Canada, the United States, Australia, and New Zealand. The findings apply principally to the UK, but many are likely to extend more widely.

Starting Points

Part 1 sets out the starting points for the analysis. Having described the challenges that the report addresses and the opportunities that exist for deepening democratic practice, it defines key terms:

- High-quality information is information that is *accurate, relevant, accessible, and balanced*.
- High-quality discussion requires high-quality information. It is also *inclusive*, it *bridges* between people of different backgrounds and perspectives, and it is *open-minded*.
- Information can range from basic to highly developed. The report identifies an ‘information ladder’ with six rungs, from the most basic *procedural* information about a vote, through *factual, positional, comparative, and analytical* information, through to *evaluative* information designed to help voters work out their own concerns and priorities.

Part 1 also identifies three broad categories of strategy for improving the quality of information and discourse: confronting misinformation; promoting quality information; and promoting quality discussion. These form the basis of Parts 2, 3, and 4.

Confronting Misinformation

Within the category of confronting misinformation, Part 2 of the report explores three strategies:

- *Banning misinformation*: This is the most direct strategy. Chapter 2 explores detailed case studies of this approach in South Australia and New Zealand. It concludes that, while the strategy has had some success in these places, the benefits it can hope to bring are limited. In the UK context, it would likely have significant costs. The report therefore recommends against its introduction in this country.
- *Fact-checking*: Fact-checking identifies and exposes misinformation without seeking to ban it, empowering voters to make up their own minds. It has recently developed considerably. Because it is reactive to information put out by others, Chapter 3 finds that it cannot in

itself offer a complete solution to the problem of poor information and discourse. But it is one important building block.

- *Transparency*: Transparency of campaigning is a prerequisite for identifying misinformation and other potentially problematic campaign tactics, such as microtargeting. Lack of transparency is particularly problematic in the digital domain. Chapter 4 finds that progress has recently been made, but that further regulatory interventions are needed.

Promoting Quality Information

Part 3 examines four approaches to promoting quality information:

- *Basic information provision*: Chapter 5 finds that the UK, in common with many democracies, does a poor job of providing basic information on how and when to vote and what the options are – particularly on who local candidates are in elections. Such information is relatively uncontroversial, so filling this gap ought not to pose great problems.
- *Voting advice applications*: A voting advice application (VAA) is a website that allows voters to answer a range of questions on their own preferences and then receive information on which parties or candidates are closest to them. Chapter 6 examines the operation of VAAs in the UK and elsewhere, especially Germany. It finds that the potential of high-quality VAAs to provide useful information is great, going well beyond even what is achieved in successful cases such as Germany. But this requires proper resourcing.
- *Policy analysis*: Many countries support impartial analyses of party policies to help voters make informed choices. In the UK, such a role is performed by the Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS). Elsewhere – most notably in the Netherlands – it is done by an independent public body. Chapter 7 finds that such work is very valuable, and there is scope in the UK to develop it further.
- *Referendum information*: Information requirements in referendum campaigns are similar in many ways to those in elections. But there are also differences, so the report treats referendum information separately, in Chapter 8. It explores different models from Ireland and New Zealand, finding the latter to offer the optimal approach. Introducing this in the UK would raise challenges, so a gradual move would be advisable.

Promoting Quality Discussion

Part 4 turns to two strategies for directly promoting high-quality discussion. Both of these begin with carefully structured and facilitated deliberation among small groups of randomly selected citizens – so-called ‘deliberative mini-publics’:

- *Citizen deliberation used to set the agenda*: Under the first strategy, deliberative mini-publics discuss an issue, recommend options that ought to be pursued, and advise whether a referendum should be held on them. Chapter 9 examines mini-publics (known in these cases as citizens’ assemblies) in Canada and Ireland. They work well and have great

potential to improve the quality of information and discussion during the subsequent referendum campaign. This potential is not always fulfilled, so careful attention should be given to ensuring better connections are made between an assembly and the wider debate.

- *Citizen deliberation used to frame the debate:* Once a referendum question has been set or an election called, a deliberative mini-public can examine the issues and offer a perspective on the views of ordinary voters once they have had the chance to learn and discuss in depth. Chapter 10 finds that this has worked well in some US states, notably Oregon, though, again, there is scope to implement the basic model more effectively in the UK.

Putting the Pieces Together: A Model for the UK

The report thus finds that all but the first of the nine strategies outlined should be developed further in the UK. Part 5 of the report examines how these could be put together. It contends that an ambitious, integrated approach could reinvigorate our democratic practice. It recommends a model for the UK with six key components:

- High-quality information should be available to voters during both election and referendum campaigns spanning *every step of the information ladder*.
- This material should be brought together in an *information hub*. This should be flexible in structure, so that voters can find their own ways into and through the material. It should be designed so as to be accessible and relevant to the broadest possible range of citizens. It should primarily exist online, backed up by leaflets and extensive advertising. There should also be materials in other formats for voters who are not online.
- The material available through the information hub should come from *diverse sources*: it should be coordinated, but not monolithic.
- *Citizen deliberation* should be integrated into all aspects of information provision. This includes the strategies exemplified in Canada, Ireland, and Oregon, but many further, innovative approaches are possible, integrating citizen deliberation into fact-checking, VAA development, policy analysis, and other elements.
- The information hub should receive *public funding* to ensure it has the resources to fulfil its potential.
- It should be run by a new independent public body.

This is an ambitious proposal that has the potential to transform the quality of information and discourse during election and referendum campaigns.

Given its ambition, it may be hard to implement. It should therefore be introduced gradually, so that confidence in its various elements can build over time. There is potential for a wide range of actors – politicians, officials, regulators, activists, NGOs, broadcasters, academics, and others – to play important roles in this. We look forward to engaging them to help make this happen.