

HEALTHY POLITICAL DISCOURSE: WHAT IS IT AND WHY DOES IT MATTER?

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Summary

- Healthy political discourse is vital for democracies to function well. Fundamental democratic processes depend on discussion, debate, description, and commentary. But recent years have seen growing concerns about the state of political discourse, both in the UK and in other countries.
- Healthy discourse should be honest, constructive, respectful, and evidence-based. But it must also be engaging, which means sometimes including the emotion, richness, and robustness of impassioned political debate. Balancing these features is not always straightforward.
- Rules, fact-checking, and education all have a role to play in safeguarding the quality of political discourse. But all participants in public discourse also have important responsibilities to uphold the norms of healthy debate.

Background

Healthy political discourse is a core feature of a well-functioning democracy. It can help to deliver many benefits to society, whereas unhealthy discourse has the potential to inflict great damage.

There is no definitive blueprint for what healthy discourse looks like. There is nevertheless widespread concern – in the [UK](#) and in [many other countries](#) – that the quality of political discourse is poor and that contemporary challenges, including polarisation and the nature of modern media, are placing it under increasing strain.

This briefing examines what healthy political discourse is and why it matters. It identifies some of the key factors that make maintaining healthy discourse difficult and highlights examples of unhealthy discourse. It considers what can be done to enable healthy discourse to flourish.

What is healthy political discourse?

Alongside other important [constitutional principles](#) – such as institutional checks and balances, free and fair elections, the rule of law, fundamental rights, and integrity and standards – healthy public discourse is an essential component of a well-functioning democracy.

Democracy is a process for making decisions. Citizens should be able to choose representatives who will serve their interests, and to hold those representatives to account for what they do. Policy-makers should be able to make and implement policy decisions that advance the public interest. People from all walks of life should feel included and able to participate actively. All these processes are underpinned by discourse – including discussion, debate, description, and commentary. This is generated by politicians, officials, campaigners, journalists, and members of the public. Healthy discourse enables such processes to run well, whereas unhealthy discourse inhibits them.

While no definitive list of the features of healthy political discourse exists, there is wide agreement on many key features. The following paragraphs highlight five: that discourse should be honest, constructive, respectful, evidence-based, and engaging.

- **Honest.** Perhaps the most central feature of healthy political discourse is honesty. [Misinformation](#) and the much-discussed ‘[post-truth](#)’ politics (which shows disregard for truthfulness) can leave voters and policy-makers struggling to know what is happening. This makes it hard for them to choose the best course of action, or even to trust the information that they see. Recent Constitution Unit [research](#) shows very high levels of public concern about dishonesty in politics, which leaves people feeling disrespected and alienated. People are angered not just by outright lying, but also by ‘[spin](#)’, and by politicians and others who avoid answering questions.
- **Constructive.** Most policy-making involves trade-offs about how different interests, priorities, and values should be balanced. Yet discourse often [appears to ignore that](#), as proponents of one or other view argue that their approach is entirely right and the alternatives entirely wrong. Such framing can make it hard for observers to work out what to think, and hard for reasonable trade-offs to be reached. Non-constructive discourse also often involves [attacks on the motives of opponents](#) – which connects to the third feature of healthy discourse.
- **Respectful.** Healthy political discourse shows respect for others, as well as for key rules and institutions. In a democratic society, all people count equally. Even when others have priorities and values very different from one’s own, their views therefore still matter, and they should be accorded respect. Disrespectful discourse often extends into abuse, which elected representatives now [routinely endure](#). Such discourse makes it harder for policy-makers to do their jobs, and dissuades good people from pursuing political careers.
- **Evidence-based.** Policy-making is more likely to deliver outcomes that serve the public interest over the long term if decisions are [based on reasoned consideration of evidence](#) regarding the effects of different options. Healthy political discourse therefore values such evidence. That is not to say there is no place for ideology: some fundamental questions are about values and cannot be resolved through evidence alone. But it is important to distinguish between fact-based and value-based arguments when taking decisions.
- **Engaging.** The features of healthy discourse outlined so far might suggest a mode of political dialogue that is very dry and drained of emotion. But well-functioning democracy requires wide participation, and few of us will be engaged by such talk for long. Healthy political discourse therefore often involves humour, emotion, and drama, as well as relevance. It should avoid being unnecessarily complex or technical. This final feature of healthy discourse may sometimes be in tension with the others, requiring trade-offs to be made.

We live in a world where these ideals are not always achieved: where many people are not respected as equals; where dishonest discourse is used to advance the wishes of some over the wider public interest. In this context, the interests of those who are disempowered or marginalised may sometimes be advanced by meeting rhetoric with rhetoric, and through displays of [anger](#) and resistance. The path towards healthier discourse is therefore not necessarily smooth.

Barriers to healthy political discourse

Some factors that inhibit healthy discourse have deep roots in human psychology. We are all subject to a range of [cognitive biases](#): we tend to focus on evidence that fits our existing beliefs and discount evidence that conflicts with them; we pay more attention to evidence that is emotionally engaging,

even to the extent of discounting evidence that is more systematic and robust; we are strongly 'tribal', and tend to support our own team come what may.

In addition – and partly as a result of these biases – many of those in public life often face incentives to engage in unhealthy discourse. Politicians may learn that they can gain more votes, campaigners that they can gain more support, and journalists that they can secure more clicks if they spin heavily, exaggerate, engage in personal attacks, and disregard important evidence. Such behaviour might benefit the individuals who engage in it in the short term, but harm the democratic process and the longer-term quality of governance as a whole.

The barriers to healthy discourse so far mentioned have always existed. But there are also factors that may be getting worse. [Changes in the media](#) over recent decades have quickened the news cycle, weakened traditional journalism, and, via social media, removed filters on access to the public realm. The first of these changes may have strengthened bias in favour of the new and dramatic over a focus on examining the core issues. Weakened journalism may increasingly focus on 'clickbait', and lack resources for knowledgeable reporting. The removal of barriers to participating in public debate has democratised whose voices are heard; but has also amplified extreme voices, conspiracy theories, and abuse.

These points link to a second trend: a shift towards greater polarisation. This has been most striking in the [United States](#), but it has affected other democracies too, including [the UK](#). It goes well beyond the UK's traditional structure of adversarial politics. The causes of this change are debated, but the effect is clear: a greater tendency to believe 'facts' from one's own side while disregarding those from the other side; and a willingness to demonise rather than respect those with different views.

The state of political discourse in the UK

There was never a golden age of political discourse. But there have been growing worries about the state of discourse – in the UK and in other democracies – in recent years.

The journalist Matthew d'Ancona wrote in 2017 of a '[crash in the value of truth](#)'. Examples of misinformation during the 2016 [Brexit referendum campaign](#) are well known. More recently, former Prime Minister Boris Johnson was found to have [deliberately misled](#) the House of Commons over allegations of illegal gatherings at 10 Downing Street during the Covid-19 pandemic. During the 2019 general election campaign, [the Labour Party misleadingly claimed](#) that leaked documents showed the entire NHS rather than just the drug-procurement element was to be part of a US–UK free trade deal; the [Conservatives changed their Twitter handle](#) to look like an independent fact-checker; and the [Liberal Democrats made their election leaflets look like local newspapers](#). Beyond such clearcut cases, the pervasiveness of 'spin' and of politicians avoiding answering the questions put to them also alienate the public and often impede constructive policy debate.

Attempts to denigrate and delegitimise individuals, groups and institutions are also widespread. While well-grounded criticisms can be necessary and healthy, rhetoric often goes far beyond that. Judges were falsely called '[enemies of the people](#)' when they ruled that parliament had to vote to approve the UK's departure from the EU. Johnson supporters sought to delegitimise the House of Commons Privileges Committee as a '[kangaroo court](#)'. In early 2023, Labour ran an [advertisement](#) suggesting that Prime Minister Rishi Sunak did not think convicted paedophiles should be imprisoned.

How can the quality of discourse be improved?

The most direct way for political discourse to be improved is for participants to respect and uphold norms such as those set out earlier in this briefing. Under the [Nolan Principles](#), all public office-

holders are expected to act with honesty, integrity, openness, accountability, objectivity, and selflessness standards that apply as much to how they speak in public as to other aspects of their roles. They are also expected to show leadership on these matters, and to treat others with respect. Politicians and others need to beware of a ‘race to the bottom’, and the risks of ‘tit for tat’.

Yet exhortations to good behaviour are unlikely to be sufficient alone. Having and enforcing clear rules is also needed. Various codes of conduct set out required standards for politicians’ behaviour – including the expectations of courtesy and respect laid out in the codes of conduct for [MPs](#) and [peers](#), and the parliamentary [Behaviour Code](#), as well as rules banning so-called ‘[unparliamentary language](#)’ in debates. The [Ministerial Code](#) requires ministers to be accurate and truthful before parliament, to provide information openly wherever possible to parliament and the public, and to treat civil servants with respect. Media regulators also have responsibilities relating to discourse: Ofcom’s [Broadcasting Code](#) sets standards to protect the public from harmful or offensive material, while [newspaper regulators](#) investigate and sanction alleged inaccuracies. The [Online Safety Act](#) introduces some regulation of digital media, though without addressing harms to the democratic process as was [originally envisaged](#).

But rules are blunt instruments too. Without violating key principles of free speech, they can address only unambiguous cases of misinformation or abuse, not the widespread resort to spin and attack. It is likely that such discourse can be curbed only if the underlying incentives to engage in it are tackled.

The media have an important role here – particularly those parts of the media with a public service remit. Fact-checking and verification are crucial, partly to shed light on specific cases, and partly to reinforce the norm that accuracy matters. The BBC and other broadcasters are increasingly using these tools, though there remains scope to make them more prominent. Full Fact and the UK Statistics Authority also play distinctive fact-checking roles.

There is emerging evidence that the use of public deliberative processes such as citizens’ assemblies can help to encourage reasoned debate – if they are embedded effectively in normal processes of scrutiny and decision-making by elected representatives.

Finally, education can play a part as well. As noted above, incentives for unhealthy discourse stem in part from deep psychological biases. While such biases cannot be removed, learning about what they are, how they affect our decision-making, and how we can keep them in check can all diminish their impact. Similarly, education in media literacy can help us to understand the discourses we are consuming and how to counter their potentially manipulative effects. A disengaged electorate can be more susceptible to disinformation, and many people cite lack of knowledge as a reason for not following politics more closely. Thus, education about politics itself is also very important.

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