

BRIEFING

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

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Alan Renwick and Tom Fieldhouse

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

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

Constitution Unit Briefings

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