# Improving Democratic Discourse in UK General Election and Referendum Campaigns

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**Abstract**

This article is a short overview of the recently released report entitled *Doing Democracy Better* published by the Constitution Unit based at University College London. The report makes a series of interesting and useful observations about the health of democratic discourse within the UK and advances a selection of recommendations for its improvement. Whilst noting the value of the report as a piece of substantive research, there are a number of further questions which need to be addressed. As such, this report should be seen as the starting point of a broader discussion that takes a more nuanced approach to improving democratic discourse and a less London‐centric approach to conceptualising the UK's political institutions and language.

**Introduction**

under the auspices of the Constitution Unit based at University College London, a recently released report by Alan Renwick and Michela Palese, entitled *Doing Democracy Better: How can Information and Discourse in Election and Referendum Campaigns in the UK be Improved?*,[1](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/1467-923X.12683?af=R#poqu12683-note-1001_2) makes a series of recommendations on improving the health of political discourse during general elections and referendum campaigns in the United Kingdom.

The report is the product of a substantive research project funded by the McDougall Trust with the objective of analysing, reflecting on, and recommending strategies as a means of improving the quality of information available to voters during the democratic process. The report is a useful first step towards opening a discussion about the quality of democratic discourse within the United Kingdom.

In terms of its relevance and broader context, the timing of the report reflects a growing sense of distrust held by voters towards the information being presented during election campaigns.[2](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/1467-923X.12683?af=R#poqu12683-note-1002_3) It is worth noting, however, that such concerns also exist outside the limited time(s) of an election or referendum campaign, and that the problems of so called ‘fake news’ and misrepresentation of facts has created a climate of uncertainty towards political actors across the ideological spectrum. This makes the report a timely and important contribution towards the discussions pertaining to improving trust in political discourse and—in so doing—trust within the liberal democratic process.

**Doing democracy better**

The central purpose of the report is to reflect on identified deficiencies within the democratic discourse and to present a series of solutions on how to address them. By engaging in this research, the lead authors contend that ‘it would be possible to do much better’ and that we should be ‘ambitious about the extent to which our democratic practice can be enriched’.[3](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/1467-923X.12683?af=R#poqu12683-note-1003_4) The areas where the report believes we can ‘do much better’ relate to the level of citizen engagement with political discussions; how citizens decide who to vote for; and the means by which voters consume political information. The report rightly does not restrict its sources of inspiration to the UK. Indeed, by drawing upon democratic practices in Ireland, the Netherlands, Germany, Canada, the United States, and New Zealand, the recommendations of the report aim to reflect effective means of citizen engagement outside the experiences of the UK. Put simply, whilst the main findings of the report are focussed upon the UK, the report is able to benefit from case studies and illustrative examples drawn from an international perspective.

Before evaluating the political value of the recommendations made by the report, it is first worth reflecting on the deficiencies within the UK's quality of democratic engagement that the authors have identified. The report categorises these as: confronting misinformation; promoting quality information; promoting quality discussion; and constructing a model for the UK. This emphasis enables the report to evaluate the extent to which the quality of discourse within the UK is measured, as well as to present its possible recommendations for improvements.

**Confronting misinformation**

In terms of confronting misinformation, the report ponders the possibility of banning misinformation. This has, as the report notes, proven effective in the cases of south Australia and New Zealand; however the benefit of banning misinformation is problematic. Alongside arguments concerning the consequential restriction of free speech, the administrative costs of doing so would be substantive. Also, given the substantial importance placed upon free democratic discourse, the opportunity to confront misinformation with alternative arguments would similarly be restricted. As John Stuart Mill also reflected, the opportunity to confront misinformation is a key element of a healthy liberal democratic society.

The report also considered the potential value of improving ‘fact‐checking’. The growing presence of fact‐checking is, arguably, a consequence of a decline in quality of how political actors present information to voters and can be seen as a way of exposing those seeking to promote misinformation to robust discussions. The report rightly notes its value as an additional component of democratic discourse, yet the extent to which fact‐checking alone can redress how political actors choose to present information is important. Put simply, those engaging in the fact‐checking would be expected to conform to a degree of political impartiality that could be problematic.

Finally, within the category of confronting misinformation, the report also evaluates the extent to which UK political actors are transparent. Ordinarily, campaign literature and other political messages are exposed to rigorous monitoring to ensure they are as accurately constructed as possible. However, this cannot be said of the digital domain. Indeed, the report suggests that within the digital domain, political actors are able to communicate misinformation more freely. In turn, this affects the broader political narratives outside the digital realm, thereby impacting upon the general quality of political discussion and scrutiny. The report also argues that scrutiny and accountability in this area remain under‐developed (relative to other contexts), and that micro‐targetting of political information remains an under‐addressed, under‐regulated issue. Consequently, the report argues that this issue can be confronted by further regulatory interventions as a way of making the digital domain similarly accountable to other campaign strategies. However, this could prove difficult to implement given the scope of internet platforms, such as Twitter and Facebook, which function as largely autonomous institutions.

**Promoting quality information**

The second area of consideration in the report is the promotion of quality information. The first issue identified by the report is the provision of basic information, such as how and when to cast a vote; the options available to voters; and the names of candidates standing in an election. This was, the report notes, particularly an issue within local elections. Addressing this issue is administratively straightforward and so should easily be rectified by existing institutions.

The report also noted the growth of ‘voting advice apps’ which provide voters with information on which candidates reflect their own beliefs in terms of policy and other information. It is interesting to note (as the report does) the quality of these apps, and their benefits to voters in countries such as Germany. However, it is important to remember the varying quality between the apps, and their capacity to produce results which they are coded to produce. Put simply, the extent to which the conclusions they draw needs to informed by the responses provided by voters. To partly address this (and other) issues, the report rightly argues that further investment is required if they are to prove an informed source of guidance for voters.

Moreover, the report suggested that impartial policy analysis of positions held by parties helped voters make informed choices about who to lend their support to. Whilst this is valuable, it is important to note that those voters who benefit from such analyses are more likely to be sufficiently politically engaged to value the impartiality of the analysis. It noted the quality of the work provided by groups such as the Institute for Fiscal Studies and highlighted the scope for further such studies in the UK.

**Promoting quality discussion**

The report made two substantive observations about the promotion of higher quality discussions as part of political discourse within the UK. These observations relate to citizen engagement in the deliberative process, and also how political debates are framed. For example, through the establishment of citizen assemblies, and how a referendum question is set and the impact it has upon sub‐questions citizens need answering before they are able to select their response. Consequently, care is needed to ensure a response to a referendum question can be interpreted by the voters in a manner that is likely to produce a meaningful response.

The first observation concerned citizen deliberation as a means of setting political agendas. This could be achieved through the promotion of more civic engagement through citizen assemblies, the report suggests. It also notes that they have proven effective in Ireland as a way of connecting political actors with voters, and can prove an effective tool in improving the quality of information available to voters. Moreover, they promote political engagement. Caution is needed, however, given the sample of citizens are more likely to be engaged in the democratic process prior to the citizen assembly and so may not be truly reflective of the population.

The second substantive observation the report made concerned the framing of political debates. For example, how a referendum question is presented to the voters affects the discourse within citizen assemblies, and also the topics of discussions and responses that are likely to affect the quality of the ensuing political debate. It is also worth noting that in order to respond to a referendum question, the voters will need information presented to them by political actors whom they trust. This is problematic if, as is known in rhetorical studies, the character and the credibility of the political actor has been compromised. Consequently, when considering the political value of citizen assemblies, it is important to approach them with healthy caution to ensure they are representative of the ideological dynamics of the population, and that the points of discussion are sufficiently balanced in a manner likely to promote both free and informed discourse with information from credible sources.

**Constructing a model for the UK**

The final discussion point concerned the development of an approach that would address the issues faced within the UK. By reflecting on the above points, the authors sought to construct and present a credible way of proposing changes to how democratic discussions take place, in order to improve the accuracy and quality of political discourse. To do this, the report made a series of observations which are summarised as:

* Information available to voters during elections should be relevant at every stage of the democratic process.
* The development of an online hub for the information, which should be accessible to as many voters as possible. Awareness of the hub can be promoted through extensive advertising and leaflets.
* To avoid the risk of becoming a monolith, the information within the hub should be diverse and come from a range of sources.
* Citizens should be part of the deliberative process through voter advice applications, citizen assemblies, fact checking, amongst others.
* The administration of the hub as a public body with public funding in order to ensure it has the resources required to meet the ambitions it proposes.

The recommendations outlined above are, largely, uncontroversial. However, they raise the question of who determines whether information is or is not relevant and/or accurate. This is a question of trust in the recommendations, and a question of impartiality for those tasked with implementing them. As such, to facilitate their implementation, the report suggests engaging with political actors, officials, regulators, NGOs, broadcasters, and academics as a way of making use of their expertise.

**Analysis and conclusions**

The promotion of higher quality information is a commendable objective and one which improves the quality of discourse in a liberal democratic society. Besides administrative hurdles, however, the proposed strategy as a means of addressing the issues within democratic discourse needs to demonstrate a broader awareness of how citizens engage with information. The proposed outline reflects a surprisingly traditional approach to modernisation that assumes the centralisation of information will facilitate an improvement in its quality. The report also suggests that a range of actors and institutions can play a significant role in implementing strategies to address the concerns it rightly raises. My concern here, however, is that they present a London‐centric focus which belies the diversity of opinions across the UK, particularly in the devolved regions. The impartiality required to engage in some of the recommendations made by the report (such as fact‐checking) would be problematic for some of those listed. Granted, they should play a role; however, it might improve the quality of information available to voters if the hub reflected more accurately the concerns of the broader population and involved a richer range of participants.

Finally, the central recommendation of the report could also be problematic if it adopts too strong a role in the administration and judgement of political facts and arguments. Granted, the report notes that diversity of opinion will be a central element of the hub, but in order to ensure that it is maintained, the hub itself will require continual monitoring and regulation to make certain it does not become a ‘gatekeeper’ of acceptable political opinion. This is because—as noted earlier—a key measure of a healthy democracy is to accept controversial opinions and then to challenge them from an informed position. Consequently, whilst the report makes a series of useful and valuable observations about the current health of the UK's democracy system, the suggested solutions require more consideration before they can become workable.

Notes

1. Renwick and M. Palese,Doing Democracy Bet-ter: How Can Information and Discourse in Electionand Referendum Campaigns in the UK be improved?,London, UCL Constitution Unit, March 2019;https://www.ucl.ac.uk/constitution-unit/sites/constitution-unit/files/184\_-\_doing\_democracy\_better.pdf (accessed 20 March 2019).2 S.
2. Fiske and F. Durante,‘Never trust a politi-cian? Collective distrust, relational accountabil-ity, and voter response’, in J. Q. van Prooijenand P. van Lange, eds.,Power, Politics, and Para-noia, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press,2014, pp. 91–105.
3. 3 Renwick and Palese,Doing Democracy Better.