

Introductions

My name is Dr Andrew S. Roe-Crines and I am an Associate Professor of British Politics at the University of Liverpool. My research focuses on political language, rhetoric, and means of communication through institutions such as Parliament, media, and political party structures (such as the conference).

The purpose of this submission is to present a few thoughts based on my own research and an insightful report by Alan Renwick and Michela Palese for a report for the *Constitution Unit* based at UCL. Such was my interest in the report that it was followed up by an article in *Political Quarterly* by myself as a way of highlighting the key parts of the report that need to be addressed. The key arguments and conclusions of both the report and my own research are summarised below.

Political Discourse

The key concern for the UK democracy presented here concerns the quality of political discourse. How politicians use language impacts on the quality of the democracy because it affects how we interrelate with each other, and emphasise particular arguments that we believe are most important. The manner in which political discourse is also engaged in at all levels affects how voters interrelate with political arguments, thus determining whether arguments are able to resonate (or not). This can be deeply significant as it is the difference between a politically informed or politically ignorant population. Indeed, I would content that discourse is not simply part of the UK democracy, rather it *is* the UK democracy as through it we decide who should act as representatives in Parliament, who wins leaders debates, and how political narratives ultimately lead to political action.

Thus, the purpose of this evidence submission is to draw the attention of the committee to the conclusions of both the UCL report and my own *Political Quarterly* piece by way of contributing to the discussion on highlighting one of the main threats to the UK's democracy *vis-à-vis* quality of democratic discourse.

Conclusions of the Report

The main conclusions of the report focused on accuracy and the problems of misinformation. Audiences gravitate towards emotional arguments and forms of rhetoric that make them feel comfortable. Populism tends to focus on a single subject, which enables them to cut through on that subject and (in so doing) appear knowledgeable and informed about the topic which they are seeking to discuss. This can be problematic for mainstream politicians whose rhetoric needs to consider a wider range of issues. Indeed, I wrote a journal article entitled *The Rhetoric of Alex Salmond and the 2014 Scottish Independence Referendum* that highlighted the mono-focus of populism enables them to circumnavigate the conventions of democratic discourse because they are rarely challenged by the issues that mainstream politicians need to discuss (for example, if a populist party seeks to highlight a single area such as the Iraq War (Respect), then they do not need to talk about the NHS, economy, taxation, EU, or other conflicts. This gives them an advantage and the mainstream a significant disadvantage.

The UCL report notes how other countries have sought to address this issue (including banning misinformation). However, because of the wider costs to democratic discourse, this option was rejected. Alternatively, fact checking producing benefits inasmuch as it is able to highlight misinformation and the exaggerations associated with populism and the threat it poses to political discourse. Fact checking is by no means a solution, but it is one of the tools that can be used to showcase authenticity and accuracy in political discourse.

The report also suggested that providing basic information to voters can be a means of improving democratic discourse. At present, the UK does not provide basic information as well as other countries. Such basic information includes how to vote, when to vote, where to vote, and what constitutes voting. This level of basic information would enable voters to see how simple it is to engage in the democratic process, and therefore would likely improve turnout.

The extent to which voters can be educated on where political parties stand on issues is also a pressing concern. Needless to say, this is their decision entirely, however how political parties present their policies is also a pressing concern. Some will be reductive and use pledge cards, whilst others will provide lengthy outlines of policies. However, a comparative approach constructed by a politically neutral body may enable voters to see and compare where parties stand, and so make a more informed choice of who to vote for. The secret ballot is an unbreakable principle, thus is a matter for their consideration only, however access to the information for voters to make their choice is not as easy as it could be as demonstrated by practice in other countries. This can be linked to the work of the IFS, who provide valuable objective information, however it can be developed further by making voters more aware of their work and how it can help produce a more politically informed voter-base.

Recommendations to Consider

The democratic discourse that voters engage with reflects the quality of politicians who are seeking to represent their constituents in Parliament. It is sometimes forgotten that MPs represent 100% of their constituents, not just their voters or party supporters. Thus, a reaffirmation that MPs should demonstrate this representative requirement can be evident in the language they use when talking about their interests in Parliament and during election campaigns.

The quality of citizen deliberation has also linkages to the quality of the democratic process. Presently, Citizens Assemblies are operating in countries such as Canada and Ireland, however the extent to which they truly reflect the views of the public is a matter of some debate. Indeed, caution should be recommended in their use as their representative nature is untested and often may lead to political parties pursuing policies they believe are in the voters interest but in reality alienate some voters. Thus, caution is recommended.

The best ways to improve the quality of democratic discourse is to provide opportunities for politicians to provide informed responses to policy justifications rather than relying on the excessive emotional drives of contemporary voter interaction (such as through Question Time and other such television shows). These shows actively reduce the quality of democratic discourse because of their focus on emotional language rather than the transfer of information. Whilst this is problematic, it is however a key part of democratic engagement. What is missing, however is the inverse. As more engagement relies on emotional exchanges, the chance to deconstruct political justifications are diminishing. This also has an impact on the quality of the discourse and the wider democratic practice.

Thus, the following recommendation are based on the evidence of both the report and my own journal articles (cited below).

- Parliamentarians should be offered communication training from professional practitioners.
- Information about where parties stand on issues should be made available to voters via a neutral body.
- High quality information about where parties stand on key issues needs to be made available throughout the democratic process (including basic information) and beyond.
- A permanent hub of democratic information should be established which voters can navigate easily and identify the position of parties in a comparative format.
- The hub should be publicly funded to ensure it has the necessary resources and neutrality.
- The hub should be both online and available in major cities to enable accessibility by all.
- The information available should be relevant to voters and their concerns, avoiding niche political issues or areas that have limited relevance to the voters.
- Citizen deliberation should be considered but approached with caution given the risks associated with structures such as Citizen Assemblies.

The complexities of such changes may be difficult to introduce, however they would improve the quality of democratic engagement.

Works Cited

Renwick, A. & Palese, M. (2019) *Doing Democracy Better: How can information and discourse in election and referendum campaigns in the UK be improved?* UCL: The Constitution Unit.

Roe-Crines, A. (2019) 'Improving Democratic Discourse in UK General Elections and Referendum Campaigns', *Political Quarterly*, 90 (2).

Other relevant publications: <https://www.liverpool.ac.uk/politics/staff/andrew-crines/publications/>