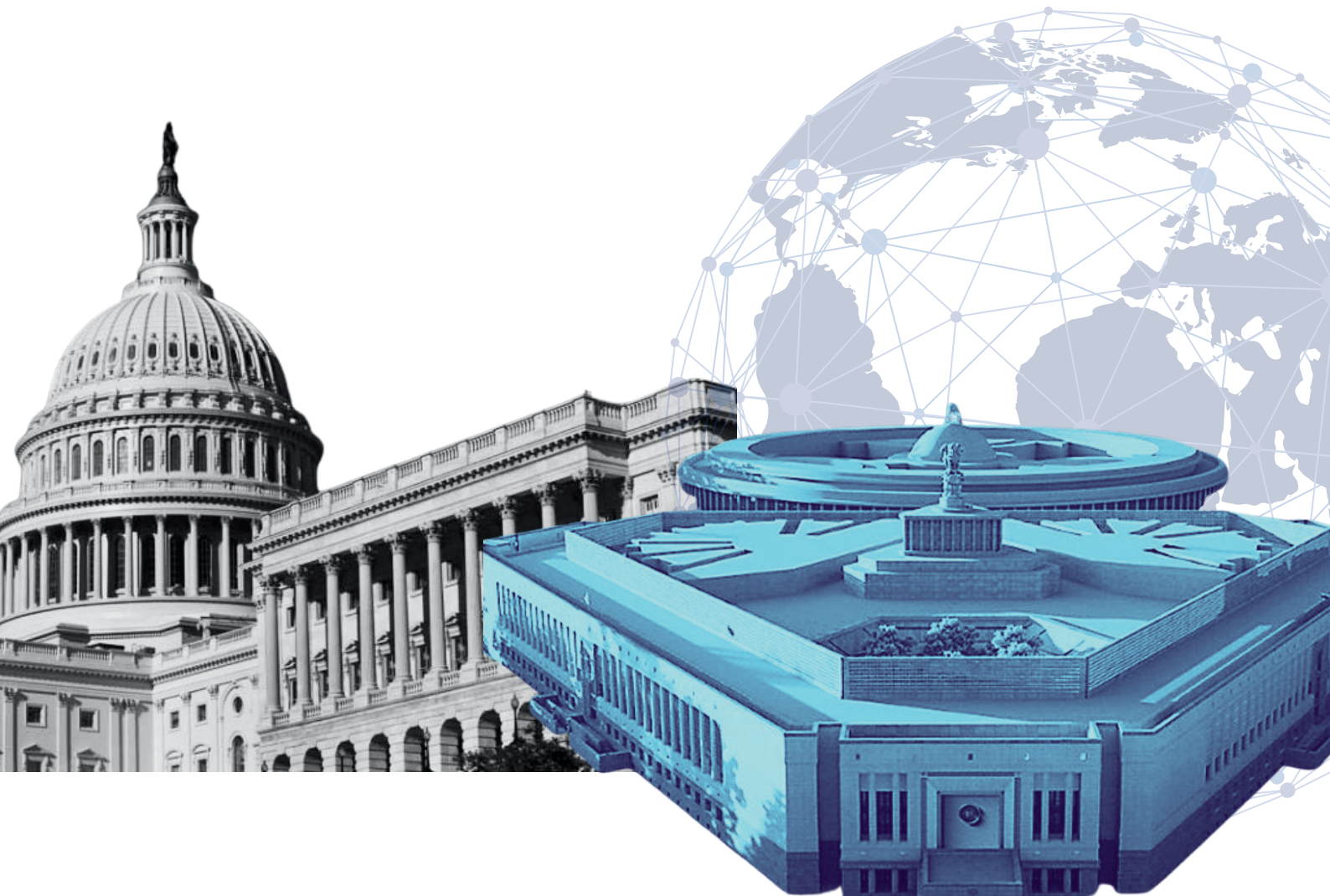


THE DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION OF PARLIAMENTARY DISCOURSE -

TROLLING LANGUAGE AND ITS IMPACT ON DEMOCRATIC COMMUNICATION



Foreword



Democracy has always thrived on dialogue, dissent, and deliberation. Yet, in the digital age, these very foundations face unprecedented strain. The rise of online trolling, disinformation, and toxic discourse is no longer confined to the margins of society; it has entered the heart of parliamentary life, reshaping the way our representatives engage with each other and with the public.

This report, **“The Digital Transformation of Parliamentary Discourse – Trolling Language and Its Impact on Democratic Communication”**, is both timely and urgent. It captures the disturbing reality that when toxicity infiltrates our democratic institutions, the cost is not just borne by parliamentarians but by every citizen whose trust in governance and public dialogue erodes.

At Future Shift Labs, our mission has always been to explore the intersection of technology, policy, and social impact. This work exemplifies that mission grounded in research, enriched by comparative insights from across democracies, and focused on actionable solutions. What stands out most in these pages is the clarity of choice before us: either allow divisive digital ecosystems to corrode our institutions, or take decisive steps to reclaim the democratic promise of technology.

Let us act with urgency, with courage, and with the conviction that democratic discourse, when protected and nurtured, remains humanity’s greatest collective achievement.

Nitin Narang

Founder, Future Shift Labs

Foreword



In every democracy, the quality of discourse defines the quality of governance. Parliament, as the temple of deliberation, is meant to embody civility, reason, and representation. Yet in today's hyper-digital era, this sanctity is increasingly undermined by trolling, toxicity, and performative disruption spilling over from online spaces.

This report, **“The Digital Transformation of Parliamentary Discourse – Trolling Language and Its Impact on Democratic Communication”**, highlights how systemic failures perverse digital incentives, weak enforcement of norms, and a media environment rewarding outrage threaten democratic institutions.

At Future Shift Labs, we believe technology must serve democracy, not distort it. The recommendations in this paper Digital Democracy Protection Acts, algorithmic accountability, safeguards for parliamentarians, and civic digital literacy are a roadmap for resilience.

I urge readers to see this not merely as a report, but as an invitation to reimagine a digital ecosystem where democratic deliberation is protected and voices can be heard without fear or distortion.

Sagar Vishnoi

Co-Founder & Director, Future Shift Labs

Author's Note



I'm Aşkın, a Chevening Scholar with a Master's in International Political Communication. My work focuses on strategic communication, political campaigning, and cross-cultural election studies, with a broader interest in policy impact and cultural diplomacy.

This project matters to me as a Turkish citizen living through democratic strain and limited parliamentary responsiveness. I wanted to place our experience in a global frame: to compare patterns across countries and separate what is universal from what is context-specific. The research maps how trolling and coordinated manipulation reshape parliamentary language, degrade public discourse, and deter participation especially for women politicians, who face disproportionate abuse. The aim is practical: evidence-based steps for parliaments, platforms, and civil society to reduce harms while protecting open debate.

Aşkın Ezo Barol
Author

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THE DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION OF PARLIAMENTARY DISCOURSE - TROLLING LANGUAGE AND ITS IMPACT ON DEMOCRATIC COMMUNICATION

Parliamentary discourse has undergone a fundamental transformation in the digital age, with social media platforms creating unprecedented opportunities for trolling language to infiltrate and damage democratic communication. This policy paper examines the global manifestation of this phenomenon across eight democratic nations and provides comprehensive recommendations for addressing what has become a critical threat to democratic institutions.

The scale of the problem is staggering:

100% of surveyed parliamentarians in the UK report experiencing online trolling, (Akhtar & Morrison, 2019) while harassment of Canadian MPs increased 800% from 2019-2023 (Zimonjic, 2024). In Norway, 87% of top politicians face unwanted harassment, with 70% experiencing social media abuse (Stranden, 2022). Women parliamentarians face disproportionate targeting, receiving twice the trolling of their male counterparts and experiencing sexualized threats that extend to family members in 19% of cases (Every-Palmer et al., 2024).

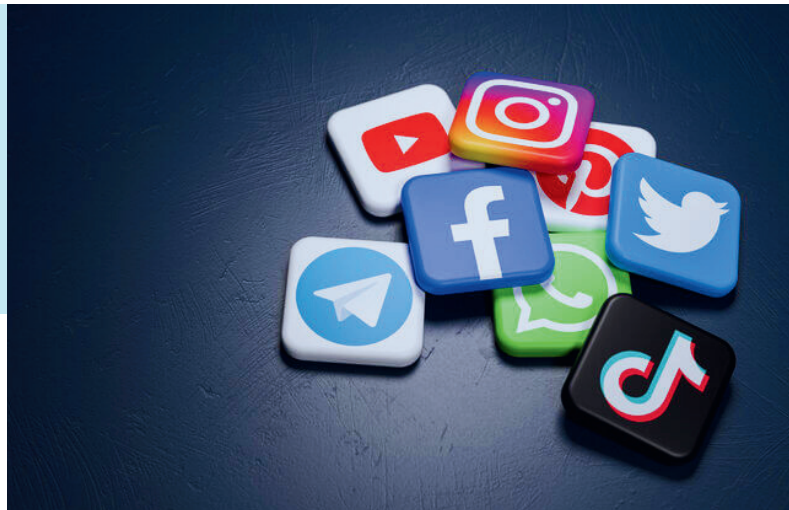


IMAGE SOURCE: ADLLINS MEDIA

“Social media platforms have become amplifiers of toxicity through engagement-driven algorithms that prioritize controversial content, generating **6-15%** greater reach for high-toxicity political tweets” (Dragan, 2024). Platform business models dependent on advertising revenue create perverse incentives where divisive political content generates higher engagement and profits. Meanwhile, content moderation remains inconsistent, with platforms applying different standards to political figures versus ordinary users (States United Democracy Center, 2025; Oscar & Nyckel, 2022).

The democratic consequences are severe: politicians increasingly avoid public engagement due to harassment risks, creating a "**spiral of silence**" where civil voices withdraw from political discourse (Paluck, 2025). This distorts public perception of political divisions and reduces the quality of democratic participation. Public trust in government has reached historic lows of **22%** in the United States, (Greenwood & Greenwood, 2025) while the toxic online environment discourages qualified candidates, particularly women, from entering public service.

Our key policy recommendations center on four pillars:

Establishing comprehensive regulatory frameworks with teeth, holding platforms accountable through transparency requirements and algorithmic auditing, protecting democratic participants through enhanced security measures and legal safeguards, and fostering international cooperation to address the global nature of digital platforms. The most critical recommendation is the creation of Digital Democracy Protection Acts in each jurisdiction, combining platform accountability with specific protections for democratic discourse and robust enforcement mechanisms.

The choice facing policymakers is clear: act decisively now to reclaim democratic discourse from trolling and toxicity, or risk the continued degradation of the institutions fundamental to democratic governance. The evidence presented in this paper provides a roadmap for that action.

Introduction to the Digital Transformation of Parliamentary Discourse

The relationship between democratic representatives and their constituents has been fundamentally altered by digital technologies. Where parliamentary discourse once occurred within the controlled environments of legislative chambers and formal press conferences, it now extends across a vast digital ecosystem characterized by immediacy and the absence of traditional gatekeepers.

This transformation began optimistically. Digital platforms promised to democratize political communication, enabling direct interaction between elected officials and citizens while providing new channels for civic engagement. (Congge et al., 2023) Early research on "liberation technology" celebrated the internet's potential to strengthen democratic participation and government accountability (Alodat et al., 2023). However, this digital utopia has given way to a more complex and troubling reality.

Recent academic research reveals that users engaging in partisan political discussions exhibit more toxic behavior across all online contexts, not just political ones (Lee et al., 2017). This suggests that political trolling reflects and amplifies deeper social divisions rather than being merely a byproduct of platform design. However, the architecture of social media platforms—designed to maximize engagement through emotionally provocative content—has created an environment where such behavior flourishes.

The COVID-19 pandemic marked a critical inflection point, with harassment of politicians increasing dramatically across all studied democracies. The pandemic created divisive policy debates that translated into unprecedented levels of online hostility, demonstrating how external events can rapidly escalate digital toxicity (Akhtar & Morrison, 2019). This period revealed the fragility of democratic discourse in digital spaces and the urgent need for protective measures.

The implications extend far beyond individual harm to parliamentarians. When political discourse becomes dominated by trolling and harassment, it degrades the quality of democratic deliberation, discourages civic participation, and ultimately threatens the legitimacy of democratic institutions. As one researcher noted, we are witnessing a shift from the "television age" to the "social media age" of political communication, characterized by horizontal, decentralized communication that lacks traditional quality controls (Congge et al., 2023).

Analysis of Trolling Language in Parliamentary Settings Globally

The Global Scope of Parliamentary Trolling

Parliamentary trolling manifests differently across democratic systems, reflecting both cultural variations and institutional differences. However, common patterns emerge that reveal the universal nature of this challenge.

In Westminster systems, traditional concepts of "unparliamentary language" have been overwhelmed by digital communications that operate outside formal parliamentary rules. The UK's Dennis Skinner, known as the "Beast of Bolsover," represented an older tradition of parliamentary heckling confined to official proceedings (Al-Othman, 2019). Today's digital trolling extends far beyond such controlled environments, creating 24/7 harassment campaigns that traditional parliamentary procedures cannot address.

New Zealand's recent parliamentary crisis illustrates these tensions. In November 2024, three Māori Party MPs performed a haka protest, with Hana-Rāwhiti Maipi-Clarke tearing up legislation while leading the demonstration (Ng, 2025). The resulting suspensions—the longest in New Zealand's parliamentary history—sparked global debate about cultural expression versus parliamentary order (MClay, 2025). The incident gained hundreds of millions of views, demonstrating how parliamentary behavior now occurs within a global digital context.

India represents perhaps the most systematic example of state-affiliated trolling operations. The BJP's IT Cell employs 100-150 paid staff plus 1.2 million volunteers for social media operations, creating a political lexicon of derogatory terms including "Pappu" (stupid), "libtard," "sickular," and "presstitute." This organized approach targets opposition politicians, journalists, and academics through coordinated harassment campaigns that blur the lines between legitimate political opposition and systematic intimidation (GIGA, 2019).



The targeting of Chandrani Murmu, India's youngest parliamentarian, with deepfake pornography before the 2024 election exemplifies how trolling has evolved beyond text-based harassment to include sophisticated technological abuse. Such attacks disproportionately target women politicians, with data showing they face nearly twice the trolling of their male counterparts in India (Cnn, 2020).

The United States has witnessed platform-specific evolution in political trolling. Former President Trump's migration to Truth Social after Twitter suspension led to intensified rhetoric, with posting frequency averaging 29 posts daily and increased use of ALL CAPS and aggressive language. His "IF YOU GO AFTER ME, I'M COMING AFTER YOU!" post in August 2023 prompted legal protective orders, demonstrating how platform behavior can have real-world legal consequences.

Cultural and Contextual Variations

Singapore maintains the strictest parliamentary decorum among studied democracies. The April 2023 incident where Speaker Tan Chuan-Jin was caught on microphone saying "f*cking populist" after an opposition MP's speech became major news precisely because such breaches are rare. Singapore's controlled environment highlights how institutional culture can moderate digital discourse, though this comes with trade-offs regarding democratic openness.

Norway provides the most comprehensive research data on politician harassment. Their 2021 study found 87% of top politicians experienced unwanted harassment, with 70% facing social media abuse—up from 40% in 2013 (Hateaid, 2023). Notably, politicians from the Progress Party (FrP) were most targeted, experiencing serious incidents in 62% of cases, suggesting that populist and anti-establishment positions may attract higher levels of trolling (Stranden, 2022).

Canada's experience demonstrates rapid escalation. Parliamentary security data shows harassment increased 800% from 2019-2023, with 530 threat files opened in 2023 versus only 8 in 2019. This dramatic increase coincided with platform ownership changes, particularly at Twitter/X, where reduced cooperation with content removal requests created enforcement challenges (Zimonjic, 2024).



IMAGE SOURCE: MOTHERSHIP

Systematic Patterns and Targeting

Gender disparities appear universal across all studied democracies. Women parliamentarians face disproportionate abuse in every country examined, with sexualized threats representing 14% of all threats against women MPs. Harassment extends to family members in 19% of cases, creating additional pressure for women to withdraw from political participation (<https://www.uk-cpa.org/news-and-views/online-violence-against-women-parliamentarians-hinders-democracy-and-all-parliamentarians-are-responsible-for-addressing-it>).

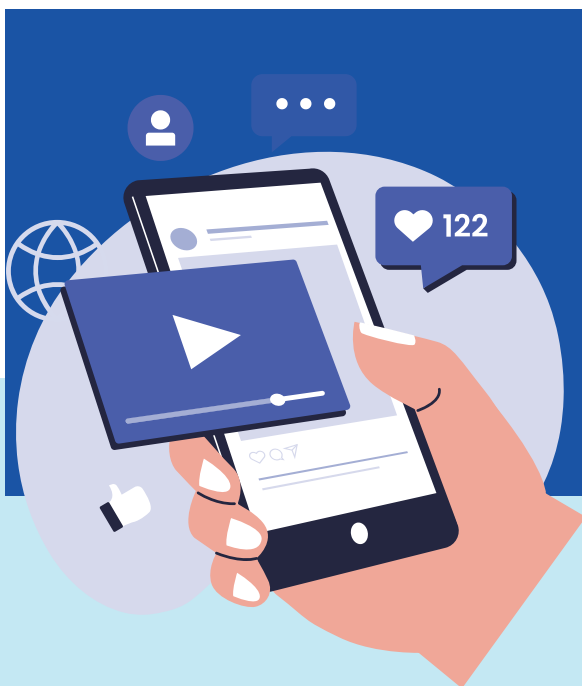
The technology evolution has introduced new forms of abuse. Deepfake technology enables sophisticated harassment campaigns, while AI-generated content makes coordinated attacks easier to execute at scale. The shift from individual trolling to organized campaigns represents a fundamental change in the threat landscape. As mainstream platforms implement stricter moderation policies, harassment campaigns move to alternative platforms with less oversight. This creates a fragmented landscape where comprehensive monitoring becomes nearly impossible.



IMAGE SOURCE: SECUREWEEK

Escalation Triggers and Patterns

Research reveals that offline events cause online hostility. The 2020 U.S. election, Brexit debates, and COVID-19 policies all triggered massive increases in parliamentary trolling across multiple countries. This event-driven nature suggests that online hostility reflects and amplifies existing political tensions rather than being primarily platform-generated (Rasmussen & Petersen, 2023).



Crisis periods particularly dangerous for democratic discourse. During the COVID-19 pandemic, New Zealand's Fixated Threat Assessment Centre reported that 53% of referrals targeted Prime Minister Ardern, while harassment levels increased across all studied countries (Rasmussen & Petersen, 2023). Emergency powers and controversial health measures created fertile ground for trolling campaigns (Inserra, 2025).

The intersection of international attention and local politics creates unique vulnerabilities. Events like New Zealand's haka incident or Singapore's parliamentary breach gain global viral attention, subjecting local political processes to international commentary and criticism that can amplify domestic trolling.

THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS IN PARLIAMENTARY TROLLING

Algorithmic Amplification and Engagement-Driven Design

Social media platforms have fundamentally transformed political discourse through algorithmic systems designed to maximize user engagement rather than promote constructive dialogue. “Twitter's internal research revealed that right-leaning political content receives 6-15% greater algorithmic amplification than left-leaning content across multiple countries, while high-toxicity tweets demonstrate 9.9% to 15.2% greater reach than civil political discourse” (Dragan 2024).

This amplification bias stems from engagement-driven algorithms that prioritize content generating strong emotional responses—shares, comments, angry reactions—over content promoting thoughtful discussion. False news spreads six times faster than true news on Twitter, (Wirtschafter, 2024) with political misinformation particularly effective during election periods when emotions run highest.

The psychological design elements of platforms create addictive usage patterns that compound these problems. Infinite scroll features, push notifications, variable reward scheduling, and public engagement metrics all contribute to what researchers term the “attention economy”—a system where platforms compete for user attention through increasingly provocative content.

Platform-Specific Vulnerabilities

Twitter/X represents the most chaotic social media platform for parliamentary discourse due to some reasons. The character limit encourages oversimplification of complex issues, while the retweet function enables rapid viral spread of inflammatory content (Fichman & Akter, 2023). Quote posting allows users to add commentary alongside original content, facilitating "dogpiling" harassment campaigns.

The platform's transformation under Elon Musk has eliminated most content moderation mechanisms. (Oscar & Nyckel, 2022) Research indicates deteriorated cooperation with government requests for content removal, while the reduction of trust and safety teams has reduced platform responsiveness to harassment complaints from parliamentarians across multiple countries.

Facebook's closed group features enable coordination of harassment campaigns away from public scrutiny. The platform's network effects allow weaponization of personal networks, where followers can be mobilized for targeted attacks on political figures. Meta's recent decision to end third-party fact-checking programs and allow more "allegations of mental illness or abnormality when based on gender or sexual orientation" signals a retreat from content quality controls.

TikTok's format particularly suits "politainment" content that blends politics with entertainment, often at the expense of serious policy discussion. Research analyzing 8,000+ comments found more trolling targeting Democratic politicians than Republicans, with humor-based rather than malevolent attacks predominating (Fichman & Akter, 2023).

However, the platform's algorithm can rapidly amplify political content to massive audiences, including minors.

Business Model Incentives

The advertising-driven revenue model creates perverse incentives for amplifying controversial political content. Platforms earn revenue through advertising based on user engagement, making emotionally provocative content more financially valuable than civil discourse (Rainie et. al, 2024). “The global digital advertising market worth €625 billion creates enormous financial pressure to prioritize engagement over discourse quality” (Weymouth, 2023).

Content creators and influencers are incentivized to produce inflammatory political content through revenue-sharing programs that reward viral content regardless of accuracy or contribution to democratic discourse. This has created a class of political influencers whose business model depends on generating controversy and emotional reactions.

The "attention economy" rewards sensationalism over accuracy, creating what researchers term a "race to the bottom" in discourse quality. Platforms must compete for limited user attention, leading to algorithmic optimization for the most engaging rather than most informative content.



IMAGE SOURCE: HARVARD BUSINESS SCHOOL ONLINE

Content Moderation Failures

Differential treatment of political figures versus ordinary users creates enforcement inconsistencies. Platforms often apply "newsworthiness" exceptions to elected officials, allowing content that would be removed if posted by regular users. This creates a two-tier system where those with the greatest influence face the least content oversight.

Scale challenges make comprehensive moderation nearly impossible. With billions of posts daily across multiple languages and cultural contexts, platforms rely heavily on automated systems that struggle with political context and cultural nuance. German NetzDG transparency reports show removal rates of only 13-15% for reported content across major platforms (Hateaid, 2023)

The international coordination problem emerges when platforms must navigate conflicting legal and cultural requirements across jurisdictions. Content legal in one country may violate laws in another, while cultural understanding of appropriate political discourse varies significantly across democratic societies.

International Influence Operations

Social media platforms have become vectors for sophisticated state-sponsored influence operations. Research identifies nearly 90,000 inauthentic accounts from 22+ state actors engaged in systematic manipulation of political discourse (Feldstein, 2025). These operations use strategic place claims and targeted messaging to amplify domestic political divisions.

Troll armies and bot networks enable a small number of actors to create the impression of widespread grassroots support or opposition. Russia's Internet Research Agency, China's "50 Cent Party," and similar operations in the Philippines, Türkiye, and Brazil demonstrate how foreign actors can exploit platform vulnerabilities to interfere in domestic political discourse (Linvill et al., 2024).

The coordination between domestic and foreign trolling creates particularly toxic environments. Foreign influence operations often amplify existing domestic political divisions, making it difficult to distinguish between legitimate political disagreement and foreign manipulation.

Platform Policy Failures and Inconsistencies

Policy enforcement varies dramatically across identical content depending on political context and platform interpretation. The same language that might result in account suspension for ordinary users often remains online when posted by political figures, creating confusion and perceptions of bias.

Transparency deficits make it impossible for researchers, policymakers, or the public to understand how platforms make content moderation decisions. While the EU's Digital Services Act requires transparency reporting, most platforms provide limited meaningful data about their enforcement practices.

Appeals and accountability mechanisms remain inadequate, particularly for time-sensitive political content. By the time harmful content is removed or appeals are processed, electoral damage may already be done. The lack of rapid response mechanisms during election periods creates particular vulnerabilities.

Impact on Democratic Communication and Institutions

Degradation of Public Discourse Quality

The infiltration of trolling language into parliamentary discourse has fundamentally altered the quality and character of democratic communication. “Research demonstrates a toxic rhetoric among Western political elites from 2016-2020, with opposition parties consistently using more toxic language than governing parties” (Mitts, 2025). This toxification creates a downward spiral where civil discourse becomes increasingly rare and unrewarded.

The "spiral of silence" effect emerges as civil users withdraw from political discourse, leaving the field dominated by more toxic participants. This distorts public perception of political divisions and reduces the overall quality of democratic participation. When reasonable voices retreat, extreme positions appear more prevalent than they actually are, creating false polarization.

Traditional gatekeepers have lost influence in the digital environment. Where journalists and editorial boards once filtered political communication, social media allows direct, unmediated contact between politicians and citizens. While this can enhance democratic participation, it also removes quality controls that traditionally maintained discourse standards.

Impact on Democratic Participation and Trust

Public trust in government has reached historic lows, with only **22%** of Americans expressing trust in government in 2024, down from peaks of over **70%** in the 1960s. While multiple factors contribute to this decline, research suggests that exposure to toxic political discourse online correlates with decreased trust in democratic institutions.

The psychological effects on political participants extend far beyond individual harm. Politicians report sleep disruption, mental health issues, and in extreme cases, self-harm ideation resulting from sustained online harassment (Akhtar & Morrison, 2019). These effects create a selection bias where only those willing to endure such treatment remain in public service, potentially reducing the quality and diversity of democratic representation.

Family targeting creates additional barriers to political participation. When harassment extends to spouses and children—occurring in **19%** of cases involving women politicians—it creates powerful disincentives for qualified candidates to enter public service. This particularly affects women, who face disproportionate sexualized threats and family targeting.

Institutional Legitimacy and Democratic Norms

Parliamentary institutions struggle to adapt traditional rules and procedures to digital environments. Most parliamentary codes of conduct lack specific guidance for social media behavior, creating enforcement gaps that undermine institutional authority.

When parliamentarians engage in trolling behavior online while maintaining decorum in formal proceedings, it creates cognitive dissonance about institutional standards.

The global nature of digital platforms subjects domestic political processes to international commentary and interference. Local political events can rapidly gain global attention, as seen with New Zealand's haka incident or Singapore's parliamentary breach, creating additional pressure on domestic democratic processes.

Democratic norms around civil discourse are being actively eroded by the normalization of trolling behavior. When political leaders engage in or tolerate harassment campaigns, it signals to citizens that such behavior is acceptable, creating a cultural shift away from democratic civility.

Long-term Consequences for Democratic Governance

The quality of policy debate suffers when political discourse is dominated by trolling and harassment. Complex policy issues require nuanced discussion that becomes impossible in environments optimized for emotional reactions and viral content. This leads to oversimplified policy positions and reduced government effectiveness.

International cooperation and diplomacy are complicated when political leaders' social media behavior becomes part of diplomatic relationships. Parliamentary trolling can affect international relations and diplomatic effectiveness, as seen in various international incidents involving political figures' social media posts.

The next generation of democratic leaders is being shaped by these toxic environments. Young people observing current political discourse may be deterred from political participation or may normalize toxic behavior as standard political practice, creating long-term threats to democratic culture.

Critical Thinking- Why These Speech is Occurring in The Parliament?

Parliamentary trolling language represents a fundamental erosion of democratic discourse norms that emerges from the intersection of individual psychological vulnerabilities, institutional design flaws, and media ecosystem incentives. This analysis examines the critical question: *why do elected representatives engage in trolling behavior within institutions designed for democratic deliberation?*

The evidence reveals that parliamentarians' use of trolling language operates as rational strategic behavior within institutional frameworks that reward confrontation over cooperation. This troubling transformation from deliberative discourse to performative disruption stems from three interconnected forces that have fundamentally altered the incentive structures governing parliamentary behavior.

Psychological Drivers: Narcissism and Strategic Attention-Seeking

The individual psychology of parliamentarians who engage in trolling behavior reveals narcissistic traits, insecurity-driven compensation mechanisms, and strategic attention-seeking that exploits institutional vulnerabilities. Research demonstrates that parliamentary trolling follows predictable psychological patterns rooted in established theories of narcissism and behavioral economics (McMillan, 2024).

The most consistent psychological factor is narcissistic personality characteristics among parliamentarians who engage in trolling behavior. Individuals with high levels of narcissism—characterized by grandiose self-perception, need for admiration, and lack of empathy—are significantly more likely to engage in trolling across different contexts. In parliamentary settings, this manifests as "[performative self-elevation](#)," where politicians use provocative statements to dominate discourse spaces and control media narratives.

Parliamentary trolling operates within a behavioral economics framework where immediate attention rewards systematically outweigh long-term reputational costs (Maltby et. al, 2015). Politicians receive immediate feedback through social media engagement metrics and news coverage that validates disruptive behavior, creating intermittent reinforcement schedules—the most powerful mechanism for maintaining behavior patterns.

Institutional Failures: Weak Enforcement and Perverse Incentives

Parliamentary institutions contain structural flaws that inadvertently reward disruptive conduct while failing to maintain accountability for democratic norms. Analysis reveals that trolling behavior emerges from rational calculations within institutional contexts that prioritize electoral performance over deliberative quality.

Parliamentary institutions rely heavily on informal norms that have systematically eroded under partisan pressure (White, 2022). When political actors discover that norm violations provide strategic advantages without meaningful consequences, institutional frameworks collapse. Enforcement mechanisms—ranging from mild reprimands to temporary suspensions—create predictable costs that politicians can incorporate into strategic calculations, often concluding that disruption is beneficial.

Electoral systems create systematic incentives for confrontational behavior. Politicians in safe seats can appeal to partisan bases rather than moderate voters, removing electoral constraints on extreme rhetoric. First-past-the-post systems reward negative campaigning and adversarial positioning, while party discipline systems advance politicians who demonstrate effectiveness at political combat rather than collaborative skills.

Media Distortion: The Performance Economy vs. Democratic Reality

The disconnect between social media representation and parliamentary reality represents the most fundamental driver of trolling behavior, creating a parallel political universe where performative disruption becomes more valuable than substantive governance. This reflects deeper tensions between democratic ideals and media ecosystems that prioritize engagement over accuracy.

Social media algorithms systematically amplify divisive content and emotional reactions, creating powerful incentives for increasingly provocative communication styles. Research demonstrates that algorithms prioritize engagement-driven content, favoring sensationalist narratives over policy discussions (Kubin & Von Sikorski, 2021). Politicians discover that provocative statements generate

Modern political communication operates within a "performative politics" framework where public perception of activity becomes more important than policy effectiveness. The speed and immediacy of social media creates pressure for reactive rather than deliberative responses, rewarding impulsive, emotional reactions while punishing careful consideration that effective governance requires.

The normalization of uncivil discourse through social media exposure affects expectations for political behavior across all settings. Research shows that exposure to uncivil political discourse online increases tolerance for such behavior, making trolling appear acceptable rather than aberrant.

Conclusion

Parliamentary trolling represents rational responses to systematically misaligned incentives rather than individual moral failure. The convergence of psychological vulnerabilities, institutional design flaws, and media ecosystem dynamics creates environments where disruptive behavior becomes strategically advantageous for political actors seeking attention, career advancement, or electoral success.

The urgency cannot be overstated. Democratic institutions depend on public trust and respect for legitimacy and effectiveness. When parliaments become venues for performative disruption rather than deliberative governance, they lose capacity to address complex social problems and maintain social cohesion that democratic society requires. The choice facing democratic societies is clear: reform institutional incentives that reward trolling behavior or accept continued erosion of democratic discourse and institutional effectiveness.

Comprehensive Policy Recommendations

The deterioration of democratic discourse in digital spaces demands bold, coordinated action from governments, platforms, and civil society. The recommendations that follow represent a comprehensive framework for protecting democracy in the digital age while preserving the fundamental values of free expression and open debate that democracy requires. These are not merely technical fixes, but systemic reforms designed to address the root causes of the crisis we have documented.

Building Strong Regulatory Foundations

Democratic societies must begin by establishing comprehensive legal frameworks specifically designed to protect democratic discourse.

The traditional approach of applying commercial speech regulations to political communication has proven inadequate for addressing the unique vulnerabilities of democratic participation in digital environments (Runde & Ramanujam, 2024) recommend that each democratic nation develop Digital Democracy Protection Acts that recognize political discourse as deserving special protection while maintaining rigorous standards for content quality.

These regulatory frameworks should distinguish clearly between commercial speech and democratic discourse, acknowledging that political communication serves essential public functions that require enhanced protection from interference and manipulation. The legislation must include three foundational elements: mandatory platform transparency regarding political content treatment, rapid response mechanisms during electoral periods, and enhanced penalties for targeting democratic participants.

This approach moves beyond the current one-size-fits-all content policies toward context-aware regulation that understands the special importance of political speech in democratic systems.

One of the most critical technical requirements involves algorithmic transparency. Current research demonstrates that engagement-driven algorithms amplify controversial content by 9.9-15.2%, creating systematic bias toward toxicity in political discourse (Dragan, 2024). Platforms must be required to disclose how their recommendation systems treat political content and offer users alternative ranking systems that prioritize accuracy and constructive discourse over engagement metrics.

Ensuring Platform Accountability

Social media platforms have become the primary venues for political discourse, yet they operate with minimal accountability for the quality and safety of democratic communication. This must change. Meaningful content moderation standards specifically designed for political discourse require human oversight for content involving elected officials or candidates. Automated systems consistently fail to understand political context and cultural nuance, making human review essential for fair enforcement (Patel and Felella, 2024).

The timing of content moderation becomes particularly critical during electoral periods. Platforms should be required to respond to harassment complaints within 2-4 hours and remove clearly violating content within 24 hours during election campaigns. The current system, where harmful content can remain online for days or weeks during critical periods, is fundamentally inadequate for protecting electoral integrity.

Independent algorithmic auditing represents another essential accountability measure. Twitter's internal research revealing 6-15% greater amplification of right-leaning content demonstrates why external oversight of algorithmic systems affecting democratic discourse is necessary. These audits should be conducted by qualified third parties with the technical expertise to evaluate complex algorithmic systems and the independence to report findings without platform interference.

Finally, robust appeals mechanisms with external oversight must be established for content moderation decisions affecting political figures. The current system, where platforms make unaccountable decisions about political speech, creates both censorship and under-enforcement problems that undermine democratic discourse.

Protecting Democratic Participants

The human cost of digital harassment on democratic participants and their families demands immediate and comprehensive protective measures. We recommend establishing specialized threat assessment centers, modeled on New Zealand's Fixated Threat Assessment Centre, with dedicated resources for protecting political figures and their families (Every-Palmer et al., 2024).

These centers should coordinate between law enforcement, mental health services, and platform security teams to provide comprehensive protection against digital threats. Mental health support represents a critical but often overlooked component of protection. Specialized counseling services should be established for political figures and their families dealing with online harassment. The psychological impacts of sustained digital abuse require treatment approaches that understand the unique challenges of maintaining public roles while under attack.

Advancing Technological Solutions

Platform design choices significantly influence the quality of democratic discourse, and governments should mandate changes that promote constructive political communication. Friction mechanisms should be required to slow the viral spread of potentially harmful political content, including brief delays before sharing, warning labels for disputed information, and cooling-off periods during heated discussions. Research demonstrates that small delays can significantly reduce impulsive sharing of inflammatory content.

User agency over their information environment represents a fundamental democratic value. Platforms should be required to offer user control options for algorithmic content curation, allowing citizens to choose between engagement-optimized feeds and alternatives that prioritize accuracy, diversity, or constructive discourse. This empowers users to shape their information environment rather than being passive recipients of algorithmically curated content.

Community moderation systems that empower users to participate in content oversight show promise for scalable content moderation while maintaining professional oversight for political content. Hybrid approaches combining automated detection, community flagging, and professional review can help address the scale challenges of content moderation while preserving human judgment for complex political contexts.

Authenticity verification systems must be developed that can identify coordinated inauthentic behavior without compromising legitimate anonymous speech. Techniques like behavioral analysis and network mapping can identify manipulation campaigns without requiring universal identity verification that might chill democratic participation.

Perhaps most importantly, alternative business models must be developed that reduce dependence on engagement-driven advertising revenue. Subscription models, public funding for essential platform services, and advertising systems that don't reward controversial content could align platform incentives with democratic discourse quality rather than engagement maximization (Brown, 2021).

Strengthening Civil Society and Media Literacy

A well-informed citizenry represents democracy's first line of defense against manipulation and harassment. Comprehensive digital literacy programs should be funded that focus on identifying manipulation tactics, understanding algorithmic bias, and developing critical thinking skills for digital media consumption programs should be mandatory in educational curricula and available as continuing education for adults (Katz & Eisen, 2025).

Independent fact-checking and verification services require sustainable funding models that don't create dependence on platforms or political actors. Professional journalism and fact-checking services provide essential public goods that require public investment to maintain independence and quality.

Civic education programs must be adapted for digital political environments, teaching citizens about democratic norms, constructive political discourse, and their roles in maintaining healthy democratic culture online. These programs should help citizens understand both their rights and responsibilities in digital democratic spaces.

Public awareness campaigns about the scale and impact of online political harassment can build social pressure for platform accountability and cultural change toward more civil political discourse. Citizens who understand the scope of the problem are more likely to support policy solutions and change their own behavior.

Civil society organizations working to combat online harassment and promote digital democracy deserve sustained support, including resources for monitoring, research, and advocacy efforts that hold both platforms and governments accountable. These organizations often serve as crucial intermediaries between citizens and institutions, requiring support to maintain their vital functions.

Advancing Research and Monitoring

Evidence-based policymaking requires robust research infrastructure independent of both platform and government influence. Academic research funding should be established specifically for studying digital political discourse, with safeguards to maintain objectivity and independence. This research is essential for understanding problems and evaluating solutions.

Standardized metrics for measuring the health of democratic discourse online would enable meaningful comparison across platforms, countries, and time periods. Current research suffers from inconsistent definitions and measurement approaches that make cross-study comparison difficult.

Platform data access for qualified researchers studying democratic discourse represents a crucial requirement, balanced with appropriate privacy safeguards. Researchers need access to platform data to understand how algorithmic systems affect political communication, but this access must be structured to protect user privacy while enabling meaningful research (Katz & Eisen, 2025).



Early warning systems should be developed for identifying escalating harassment campaigns or manipulation operations before they reach crisis levels. Predictive analytics could help platforms and governments respond more quickly to emerging threats rather than reacting after damage has occurred.

Longitudinal studies tracking the long-term effects of digital political discourse on democratic participation, institutional trust, and political culture are essential for understanding the full impact of these phenomena. Short-term studies cannot capture the cultural and institutional changes that unfold over years and decades.

Implementation Strategy and Timeline

The urgency of protecting democratic discourse requires immediate action balanced with the complexity of implementing comprehensive reforms. In the immediate term (0-6 months), governments should establish oversight bodies, implement emergency response protocols for election periods, and begin international coordination discussions. The protection of upcoming elections requires rapid implementation of basic protective measures.

Short-term goals, should focus on passing comprehensive legislation, implementing platform transparency requirements, and establishing threat assessment capabilities. This period should prioritize creating the legal and institutional frameworks necessary for long-term solutions.

Medium-term objectives, should deploy algorithmic auditing systems, establish international cooperation mechanisms, and begin evaluating initial policy effectiveness. This phase should focus on implementation and refinement of policy frameworks based on early experience.

Long-term goals, should aim for cultural shifts toward civil political discourse, sustainable funding models for platform oversight, and resilient democratic discourse ecosystems. Long-term success requires cultural and institutional changes that extend beyond regulatory compliance to create new norms and expectations for digital democratic participation.

Enforcement and Accountability Mechanisms

Effective policy requires meaningful consequences for non-compliance. Financial penalties should follow the EU Digital Services Act model, with fines up to 6% of global revenue for platform non-compliance, along with potential service restrictions for persistent violators. Penalties must be large enough to change platform behavior rather than being treated as a cost of doing business.

Clear enforcement procedures with due process protections for both platforms and users are essential. Regulatory overreach can be as harmful to democracy as under-regulation, requiring careful balance between accountability and procedural fairness. The enforcement process must be transparent and subject to judicial review to maintain legitimacy.

Performance metrics should be developed for measuring policy effectiveness, including harassment reduction, democratic participation rates, and discourse quality measures. Policy success should be measured by outcomes rather than compliance activities, ensuring that regulations achieve their intended democratic benefits.

Public reporting requirements for all oversight bodies will ensure transparency and democratic accountability in the regulation of democratic discourse. Citizens have a right to understand how their democratic communication systems are being governed and whether protective measures are working effectively.



IMAGE SOURCE: FORBES

Finally, sunset clauses and review processes should be established for all regulatory measures, ensuring that policies can adapt to changing technological and social circumstances while maintaining core protections for democratic discourse. Technology and society evolve rapidly, and regulatory frameworks must be designed to evolve as well.

The digital transformation of parliamentary discourse represents one of the most significant challenges facing democratic governance in the 21st century. The evidence presented in this policy paper demonstrates that trolling language has moved beyond a mere social media phenomenon to become a systematic threat to democratic institutions, discourse quality, and civic participation.

The scale of the crisis demands immediate action.

When 100% of parliamentarians in some countries report experiencing online harassment, when women face twice the trolling of their male counterparts, and when harassment increases 800% in just four years, we are witnessing the systematic breakdown of civil democratic discourse. The consequences extend far beyond individual harm to threaten the foundations of democratic governance itself.

The path forward requires coordinated action across four critical domains: comprehensive regulatory frameworks that hold platforms accountable while protecting democratic discourse, technological solutions that align platform incentives with democratic values, international cooperation to address the global nature of digital platforms, and cultural change that re-establishes norms of civil political discourse.



IMAGE SOURCE: FITDAY

The policy recommendations outlined in this paper provide a roadmap for reclaiming democratic discourse from trolling and toxicity. However, their implementation requires political will, international cooperation, and recognition that the stakes involved extend far beyond platform regulation to the survival of democratic governance itself.

The choice facing policymakers is stark: act decisively now to protect democratic discourse, or risk the continued degradation of the institutions fundamental to democratic society. The evidence is clear, the solutions are available, and the time for action is now. The future of democratic governance depends on the decisions made in the coming months and years regarding how we govern the digital spaces where democratic discourse increasingly occurs.

We cannot allow the promise of digital democracy to be hijacked by those who seek to undermine democratic institutions through harassment, intimidation, and toxic discourse. The recommendations in this paper provide a framework for ensuring that digital technologies serve democratic flourishing rather than democratic decay. The implementation of these policies will determine whether the next generation inherits stronger or weaker democratic institutions than those we have today.



IMAGE SOURCE: PIXABAY

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Thank You Note

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Finally, we thank you, the reader, for engaging with this work. Together, we can ensure that digital transformation strengthens the foundations of democracy rather than undermining them.

Future Shift Labs

