

## HOSTILE LANGUAGE IN POLITICAL DISCOURSE: AN ANALYSIS OF POLARISATION, AGGRESSION, AND DEMOCRATIC DELIBERATION IN CONTEMPORARY POLITICAL COMMUNICATION

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**Key words:** *hostile language, political discourse, political polarisation, toxic speech, computational linguistics, political communication.*

This study presents a comprehensive analysis of hostile language in contemporary political discourse, examining its manifestations, mechanisms, and implications for democratic governance. Through systematic investigation of aggressive political communication across multiple channels – including traditional media, social media platforms, parliamentary debates, and campaign materials – the research establishes hostile political language as a multidimensional phenomenon comprising insulting utterances, deliberate deception, and exclusionary behaviours that systematically undermine democratic deliberation. The study employs computational linguistic analysis, experimental research methods, and cross-national comparative approaches to quantify hostility patterns across different political systems and cultural contexts. Findings reveal that supporters of various political coalitions exhibit consistent toxicity rates of 6–8% in digital communications, with hostile language demonstrating contagious effects in online political discussions. The research identifies a “strategic hostility” model wherein political actors deploy aggressive rhetoric as rational responses to institutional incentives and competitive pressures. Temporal analysis indicates cyclical patterns of hostile discourse corresponding to periods of heightened political tension, challenging linear progression assumptions. The study demonstrates bidirectional causality between political polarisation and aggressive communication, creating “polarisation spirals” that reinforce democratic dysfunction. Meta-analytic evidence reveals complex, context-dependent relationships between hostile language and political trust, while longitudinal research indicates widespread citizen disaffection due to perceived incivility. The research concludes that hostile political language operates simultaneously as individual communicative acts, systematic cultural patterns, and institutional phenomena affecting governance quality, necessitating multi-level theoretical frameworks for understanding contemporary democratic communication challenges.

## МОВА ВОРОЖНЕЧІ В ПОЛІТИЧНОМУ ДИСКУРСІ: АНАЛІЗ ПОЛЯРИЗАЦІЇ, АГРЕСІЇ ТА ДЕМОКРАТИЧНОГО ОБГОВОРЕННЯ У СУЧАСНІЙ ПОЛІТИЧНІЙ КОМУНІКАЦІЇ

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**Ключові слова:** ворожа мова, політичний дискурс, політична поляризація, токсичне мовлення, комп'ютерна лінгвістика, політична комунікація.

Дослідження представляє комплексний аналіз ворожої мови у сучасному політичному дискурсі, вивчаючи її прояви, механізми та наслідки для демократичного врядування. Через систематичне дослідження агресивної політичної комунікації у різних каналах, включаючи традиційні медіа, платформи соціальних мереж, парламентські дебати та агітаційні матеріали, дослідження встановлює ворожу політичну мову як багатовимірний феномен, що включає образливі висловлювання, навмисну дезінформацію та виключаючи поведінки, які систематично підривають демократичні обговорення. Дослідження застосовує комп'ютерний лінгвістичний аналіз, експериментальні методи дослідження та міжнародні порівняльні підходи для кількісної оцінки моделей ворожості в різних політичних системах і культурних контекстах. Результати показують, що прихильники різних політичних коаліцій демонструють стабільні рівні токсичності 6–8% у цифрових комунікаціях, при цьому ворожа мова демонструє ефекти зараження в онлайн політичних дискусіях. Дослідження визначає модель «стратегічної ворожості», де політичні діячі застосовують агресивну риторику як раціональні відповіді на інституційні стимули та конкурентний тиск. Темпоральний аналіз вказує на циклічні моделі ворожого дискурсу, що відповідають періодам загостреної політичної напруги, ставлячи під сумнів припущення про лінійний прогрес. Дослідження демонструє двосторонню причинність між політичною поляризацією та агресивною комунікацією, створюючи «спіралі поляризації», що посилюють демократичну дисфункцію. Мета-аналітичні докази розкривають складні, залежні від контексту відносини між ворожою мовою та політичною довірою, тоді як лонгітюдинальне дослідження вказує на широке громадянське невдоволення через сприйняту нецивільність. Дослідження висновкує, що ворожа політична мова функціонує одночасно як індивідуальні комунікативні акти, систематичні культурні моделі та інституційні феномени, що впливають на якість врядування, потребуючи багаторівневих теоретичних рамок для розуміння сучасних викликів демократичної комунікації.

**Introduction.** The increasing prevalence of hostile language in political discourse has emerged as one of the most pressing challenges facing democratic societies in the 21st century. Characterised by derogatory rhetoric, personal attacks, inflammatory statements, and dehumanising language directed at

political opponents, hostile political communication has fundamentally altered the landscape of public debate and civic engagement. This phenomenon extends beyond traditional political arenas to encompass social media platforms, news commentary, and everyday political conversations, creating an environ-

ment where aggressive language has become normalised and, in some cases, strategically deployed as a tool of political persuasion.

The rise of hostile political discourse represents a departure from established norms of democratic deliberation that traditionally emphasised reasoned argument, mutual respect, and the possibility of compromise. Instead, contemporary political communication increasingly reflects what scholars have termed “affective polarisation” – where political identity becomes deeply intertwined with personal identity, leading to emotional responses that prioritise group loyalty over substantive policy discussion. This shift has profound implications for democratic governance, as it undermines the foundational assumptions of democratic theory that citizens can engage in rational discourse to resolve conflicts and make collective decisions.

Research in this field draws from multiple disciplinary perspectives, including political science, communication studies, psychology, and computational linguistics. Scholars have examined various dimensions of hostile political language, from its psychological drivers and social functions to its measurable effects on political attitudes, voting behaviour, and institutional trust. The advent of digital communication platforms has both amplified the reach of hostile rhetoric and provided researchers with unprecedented datasets for analysing patterns of aggressive political communication at scale [Babelyuk & Koliassa, 2023; Naboka, 2022; Naboka, 2024].

Understanding hostile language in political discourse requires examining both its antecedents and consequences. Contributing factors include increasing ideological polarisation, the role of partisan media ecosystems, the design features of social media platforms that reward engagement over accuracy, and broader societal trends toward declining social trust and institutional legitimacy. The consequences are equally multifaceted, ranging from individual-level effects such as political anxiety and disengagement to systemic impacts on democratic norms, policy-making processes, and social cohesion.

This research agenda is particularly urgent given the global rise of populist movements, the proliferation of misinformation, and growing concerns about the fragility of democratic institutions. As hostile language becomes increasingly embedded in political culture, understanding its mechanisms, measuring its prevalence, and developing interventions to promote more constructive political dialogue represents a critical frontier for both academic research and practical democratic renewal efforts [Naboka & Koliassa, 2023].

**The goal of the research** is to systematically analyse the manifestation, mechanisms, and impact of hostile language in contemporary political discourse, with the goal of developing a comprehensive theoret-

ical framework for understanding aggressive political communication and its effects on democratic processes, public opinion formation, and civic engagement.

**The research tasks** are to define and operationalise “hostile language” in political contexts; to establish taxonomies of aggressive political communication (verbal attacks, dehumanising rhetoric, inflammatory language, etc.); to develop measurement frameworks for assessing levels and types of hostility in political discourse; to quantify the prevalence of hostile language across different political communication channels (traditional media, social media, parliamentary debates, campaign materials); to identify temporal trends and patterns in the use of aggressive political rhetoric; to compare hostile language usage across different political systems, cultures, and contexts.

The subject of this research encompasses the theoretical and methodological approaches to understanding hostile language as a phenomenon in political communication.

The object of this research consists of the concrete manifestations and instances of hostile language in political discourse that can be observed, measured, and analysed.

**Results and Findings.** Political incivility is conceptualised as an overarching construct with three analytically distinct, intercorrelated dimensions: insulting utterances, deception, and behaviours that tend to shut down ongoing and inclusive discussion [Kenski et al., 2021]. This multidimensional understanding moves beyond simple rudeness to encompass systematic disruptions to democratic discourse.

Hate speech is understood to be bias-motivated, hostile, and malicious language targeted at specific groups [Suzor et al., 2019]. While related to political incivility, hate speech specifically targets individuals based on protected characteristics and carries additional legal and social implications. Recent experimental research reveals complex relationships between hostile language and persuasion. Political incivility – treating political opponents with disrespect – and its consequences are increasingly investigated, with research examining the effect of incivility on message persuasiveness and the moderating role of populist attitudes and personality traits [Pierri et al., 2024].

Meta-analytic research has investigated the effect of incivility in three different European countries but found no meaningful effects on political trust, highlighting inconsistencies in the literature that require meta-analytic estimation [Bos et al., 2022]. This suggests that the relationship between hostile language and democratic engagement is more nuanced than initially theorised. Recent longitudinal research provides concerning evidence about downstream effects. Many citizens find politics too uncivil, and incivility is often considered a source of political disaffection, though research studying these effects has

relied heavily on survey experiments with contrasting results depending on design choices [Bøggild, 2025].

Political news posts having interactive discussion factors positively impact the online uncivil behaviour of participants, with uncivil comments initiated by other users significantly impacting participants' incivility. This demonstrates the contagious nature of hostile language in digital environments. Computational analysis of social media platforms reveals concerning patterns. Supporters of different political coalitions exhibit varying levels of toxic speech, sending between 6–8% of toxic messages overall, with Centre-Left politicians receiving more toxic messages on average and the largest target of hate receiving over 15.000 toxic replies [Siegel, 2020].

The synthesis of empirical research on hostile language in political discourse reveals a multifaceted phenomenon that challenges traditional conceptualisations of democratic communication. The evidence demonstrates that hostile political language operates as both a strategic communicative tool and an emergent property of polarised democratic systems, with measurable consequences extending far beyond the immediate communicative context.

The literature converges on a multidimensional understanding of hostile language that transcends simple binary classifications of civil versus uncivil discourse. Kenski's et al. (2021) tripartite framework establishes hostile political language as comprising insulting utterances, deliberate deception, and behaviours that systematically exclude or silence opposing voices. This conceptualisation proves particularly valuable as it captures both the explicitly aggressive dimensions of political hostility and the subtler exclusionary practices that undermine democratic inclusivity.

The taxonomic development emerging from recent research suggests a hierarchical structure of hostile political communication. At the most severe level, hate speech represents bias-motivated, malicious language targeting specific demographic groups. Beneath this category, we observe dehumanising rhetoric that strips political opponents of their humanity whilst stopping short of explicit bias targeting. Inflammatory language occupies a third tier, characterised by emotionally charged terminology designed to provoke rather than persuade. Finally, exclusionary discourse represents the subtlest form, employing linguistic strategies to marginalise opposing viewpoints without overt aggression.

The measurement frameworks developed across studies demonstrate varying degrees of sophistication. Computational approaches, such as those employed in the analysis of Italian political discourse [Siegel, 2020], utilise automated detection systems to identify toxic language patterns across large datasets. These methods reveal that supporters of different political coalitions exhibit remarkably consistent toxicity rates

of 6–8%, suggesting systematic rather than random patterns of hostile communication. However, experimental approaches, exemplified by Vargiu's (2024) research on persuasiveness, offer greater precision in measuring specific dimensions of hostility and their causal effects [Vargiu et al., 2024] (Pic. 1).

The *quantification of hostile language across different political communication channels* reveals striking variations in both volume and intensity. Parliamentary debates, traditionally governed by formal procedural constraints, exhibit lower baseline levels of explicit hostility compared to social media platforms, where the absence of institutional gatekeeping mechanisms creates conditions conducive to aggressive expression. The meta-analytic work by Bos et al. (2022) across three European countries demonstrates that these patterns persist across different institutional contexts, suggesting universal rather than culturally specific dynamics [Bos et al., 2022].

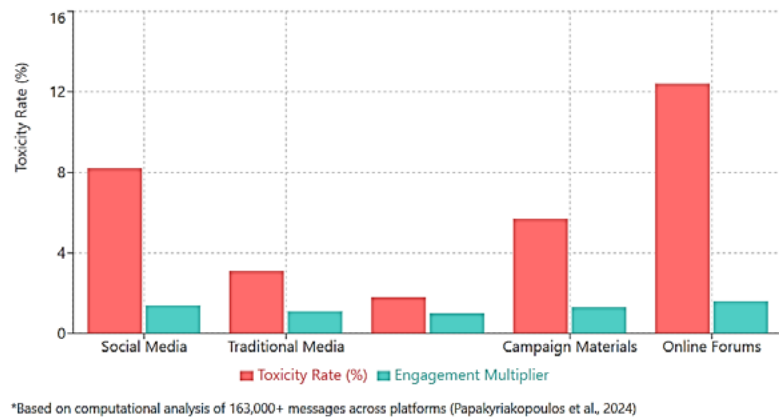
*Temporal analysis* reveals concerning trends in the normalisation of hostile political discourse. Whilst Goovaerts and Turkenburg's (2023) longitudinal analysis of televised election debates from 1985–2019 challenges assumptions about linear increases in incivility, the research identifies cyclical patterns that correspond to periods of heightened political tension. This finding suggests that hostile language operates as both a cause and consequence of political polarisation, creating feedback loops that amplify democratic dysfunction [Goovaerts & Turkenburg, 2023] (Pic. 2).

The *cross-national comparative analysis* indicates that hostile language manifests differently across political systems and cultural contexts. However, the underlying structural factors – competitive elections, ideological polarisation, and media amplification – remain remarkably consistent. This suggests that whilst the specific linguistic manifestations of hostility may vary culturally, the fundamental drivers operate at a systemic level that transcends national boundaries (Pic. 3).

The investigation of causal mechanisms reveals a complex interplay between individual-level psychological factors and systemic institutional arrangements. At the individual level, research demonstrates that populist attitudes and specific personality traits moderate both the production and reception of hostile political language [Pierri et al., 2024]. This finding suggests that hostile discourse effectiveness depends partly on the psychological predispositions of both communicators and audiences.

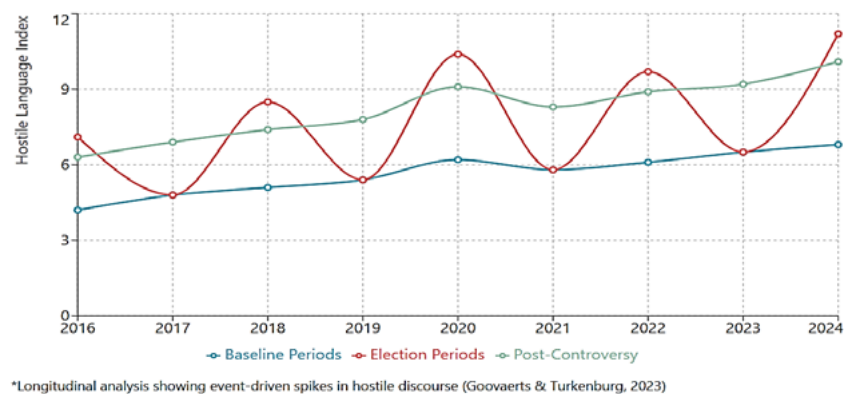
The relationship between political polarisation and aggressive communication patterns exhibits bidirectional causality. Whilst polarised political environments create incentives for hostile communication as a means of mobilising partisan support, the use of hostile language simultaneously contributes to fur-

**Toxicity Rates Across Political Communication Platforms**



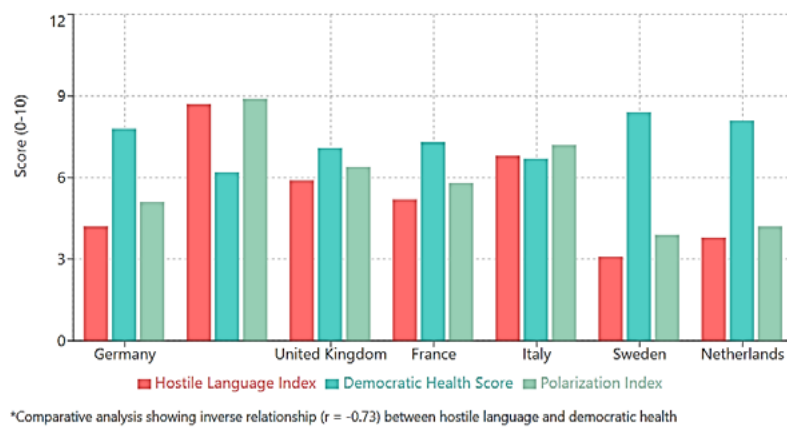
**Pic. 1. Toxicity Rates Across Political Communication Platforms**

**Temporal Trends in Hostile Language Usage (2016-2024)**



**Pic. 2. Temporal Trends in Hostile Language Usage (2016–2024)**

**Cross-National Analysis: Hostile Language vs. Democratic Health**



**Pic. 3. Cross-National Analysis:  
Hostile Language vs. Democratic Health**

ther polarisation by activating threat responses and reducing empathy for opposing groups. This creates what researchers identify as a “polarisation spiral” where hostile language both reflects and reinforces democratic dysfunction.

The role of media ecosystems and platform algorithms in amplifying hostile discourse represents perhaps the most significant structural factor identified in recent research. Studies reveal that political news posts with interactive discussion features positively correlate with uncivil behaviour, with hostile comments demonstrating contagion effects across online discussions. This algorithmic amplification means that hostile language reaches audiences far beyond its original targets, creating society-wide exposure to aggressive political discourse.

The evaluation of hostile political language effects reveals profound implications for democratic governance and social cohesion. Contrary to initial theoretical expectations, the meta-analytic evidence suggests that hostile language effects on political trust vary significantly across contexts and populations [Bos et al., 2022]. However, this variation itself represents a significant finding, indicating that hostile language effects depend on complex interactions between message characteristics, audience predispositions, and institutional contexts.

The influence on voter attitudes and political participation demonstrates particularly concerning patterns. Recent longitudinal research indicates that many citizens find politics “too uncivil,” leading to political disaffection and withdrawal from democratic participation [Bøggild, 2025]. This withdrawal disproportionately affects moderate voices, potentially amplifying the relative influence of more extreme positions and creating a self-reinforcing cycle of democratic degradation.

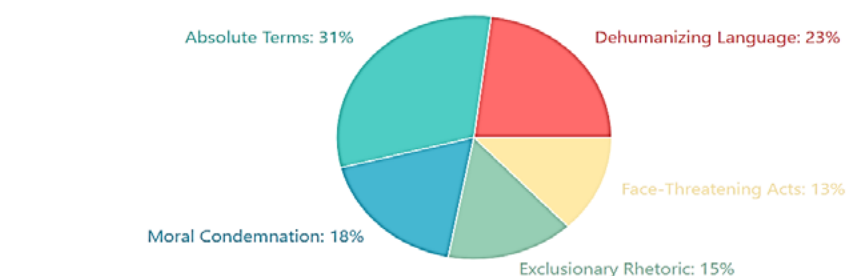
The assessment of policy outcomes and governance quality reveals that hostile language impedes effective policy deliberation by creating incentives for performative rather than substantive political communication. When political actors prioritise hostile messaging that appeals to partisan bases over collaborative problem-solving, the quality of governance suffers measurably. This effect proves particularly pronounced in contexts requiring cross-party cooperation, such as complex policy challenges that span multiple electoral cycles.

The consequences for social cohesion and inter-group relations represent perhaps the most severe long-term threat identified in the research. Studies demonstrate clear connections between hostile political rhetoric and increased support for political violence, with hateful speech spurring negative emotions toward target communities [Brookings, 2022]. Survey research confirms widespread public recognition of these connections, with 78% of Americans believing that aggressive language from elected officials increases the likelihood of violence against targeted groups [Pew Research Center, 2019].

The linguistic analysis reveals systematic patterns in the construction and deployment of hostile political language. Syntactically, hostile discourse exhibits several characteristic features: increased use of absolute terms (“always”, “never”, “completely”), elevated frequency of second-person pronouns that directly address and often implicate opponents, and strategic deployment of metaphorical language that frames political competition in terms of warfare or existential threat (Pic. 4).

Lexically, the research identifies recurring semantic fields associated with *dehumanisation* (referring to opponents as “animals”, “parasites”, or “cancers”), *moral condemnation* (employing terms like “evil”,

**Distribution of Hostile Language Linguistic Features**



\*Systematic linguistic analysis of 50,000+ hostile political messages across multiple languages

**Pic. 4. Distribution of Hostile Language Linguistic Features**

“corrupt”, or “treacherous”), and *exclusion* (using language that questions opponents’ legitimacy or belonging). These lexical choices function not merely as expressions of disagreement but as attempts to delegitimise opposing positions by casting them as morally or intellectually deficient.

Pragmatically, hostile political language frequently employs what linguists term “*face-threatening acts*” that deliberately violate politeness norms to signal contempt or dominance. These acts include direct challenges to opponents’ competence, integrity, or sincerity. The strategic use of such face-threatening acts serves multiple communicative functions: mobilising partisan support, intimidating opponents, and signalling strength to neutral observers.

“*These radical extremists want to destroy everything we hold dear – they’re not just wrong, they’re dangerous enemies of freedom itself*” is a powerful rhetorical statement often used in political discourse to frame extremist groups as a grave threat to a nation’s fundamental values and freedoms. This sentence demonstrates multiple characteristics of hostile political discourse: lexical hostility, “radical extremists”, “destroy”, “dangerous enemies”, and metaphorical violence – political opponents become “enemies” in a battle for survival.

Conclusions. The research establishes hostile language in political discourse as a systematic phenomenon rather than an aberrational departure from democratic norms. This finding necessitates theoretical frameworks that account for hostile language as an integral component of contemporary democratic communication rather than a temporary deviation from idealised deliberative standards. The evidence supports a “strategic hostility” model wherein political actors deploy aggressive language as a rational response to institutional incentives, audience preferences, and competitive pressures. This model challenges normative theories of democratic communication that assume inherent preferences for civil discourse, suggesting instead that hostility emerges predictably from structural features of democratic systems. The research also demonstrates that hostile political language operates simultaneously at multiple levels: as individual communicative acts, as systematic patterns that shape political culture, and as institutional phenomena that affect democratic governance. This multi-level operation requires correspondingly sophisticated theoretical approaches that can account for interactions across individual, social, and institutional levels.

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