

**MORE
RESPECT,
PLEASE!**

Discussion culture in
German local politics

A qualitative study by pollytix strategic research,
commissioned by the Körber-Stiftung

**“You get very agitated, very emotional,
because you are being attacked personally.
And because it happens so frequently, you
sometimes go to the meetings with a queasy
feeling and are glad when it's over.”**

(Other party; female councillor from a small municipality in eastern Germany)

**“In our village, it's really all groups across the board.
No one has any training in, for example, how to
discuss, how to talk, how to moderate – as is some-
times the case in companies.”**

(Freie Wähler (Free Voters); male councillor from a small municipality in western Germany)

**“In the council meeting, you want to present
your position. And then it's more of a
hard-fought battle than in committees,
for example.”**

(AfD; female councillor from a large municipality in eastern Germany)

**“There are actually three or four councillors who have
never uttered a sound. I didn't even know they had
vocal cords. They also never contradict the mayor.”**

(CDU; female councillor from a small municipality in western Germany)

Editorial



According to media scientist Bernhard Pörksen, our society is undergoing a communicative transformation. An atmosphere of great irritability is increasingly determining how we speak to each other, whether in social media or on the street. Frequent targets of this annoyance are “politicians” – and female politicians in particular. Statistics show that local elected officials are being attacked more and more frequently by their citizens every year. A survey commissioned by the Körber-Stiftung of around 1,600 mayors from all over Germany shows that more than half have been insulted, threatened or physically attacked at least once.

It was important to us to react here – and so, together with Germany’s leading municipal associations, we developed the online portal “Stark im Amt” (Strength in Office), which offers help to all those active in municipal politics, including many volunteers. In addition to a lot of encouragement, we also received indications that inappropriate attacks have increasingly found their way into municipal parliaments, municipal councils or city councillors’ assemblies. This made us sit up and take notice. And it prompted us to commission the pollytix institute to conduct in-depth interviews with 30 local politicians from all over Germany.

The result: The respondents see a clear need for improvement in the culture of discussion. They complain about a lack of respect, a lack of professional expertise and objectivity, and feel that there are deficits in the willingness to compromise and the involvement of all members. This is demotivating, and not only for newcomers to politics. Aggressive behaviour robs many of their desire for political work, and some are considering resigning from office. This development is alarming, as local politics in particular can be seen as the link between citizens and politics, as the beating heart of democracy. Civil society is also called upon here to contribute to preserving a good culture of discussion with ideas and approaches. The study therefore also provides indications of where best to start. We hope you find it to be an interesting and informative read.

Sven Tetzlaff

Head of Department Democracy,
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1. At a glance

Involvement in local politics is one of the pillars of democracy. In municipal and local councils, decisions are made that have a direct impact on the everyday lives of citizens. However, the mostly unpaid councillors seldom receive recognition for this from their constituents; they are far more likely to hear criticism. And this criticism can sometimes be very destructive, especially when it is accompanied by verbal or even physical abuse. Mayors in particular are affected by this¹.

But the grievances do not only come from outside. Debates also escalate in the council meetings themselves. This is shown, for example, by the results of a study conducted by the Heinrich Böll Stiftung² on local politicians' experiences of abuse in Germany. Several of them reported an increasingly "harsh tone" in the discussions about local political decisions. Conflicts were said to be party-politically charged and to lead straight to altercations. The fact that these are not isolated cases is shown by the reporting of many newspapers, online and radio media, both locally and nationally. At the latest since the AfD³ entered local councils as well as parliaments at the state and national level, the question of how the quality of debates among politicians has developed has come to the fore.

In order to investigate this question, an empirical study of discussion culture in local politics is of particular interest. For this purpose, 30 guided in-depth interviews with councillors were conducted and analysed. In a first step, the question of what

the councillors understand by discussion culture was explored. It became clear that, regardless of municipality size, party affiliation or gender, they share a very similar basic understanding of discussion culture. In particular, the point at which fair interaction is discarded was named consistently by the interviewees. Discussions cross the red line when statements become personal and no longer relate to the issue at hand. This includes spreading rumours, insults, threats or an aggressive, attacking tone. Even if such massive transgressions are relatively rare, there is still a great need for improvement in the culture of discussion in almost all councils. And against the background of the already high demands of voluntary office, it is understandable that a negative discussion culture also has a negative effect on the motivation of the councillors. If a person's own political commitment becomes a burden, the resulting consequences for the entire municipality should not be underestimated: The willingness of politically dedicated people to participate decreases. There is a great divergence here between the importance of voluntary work for democracy and the working conditions of voluntary councillors.

Individual strategies are frequently employed to solve existing conflicts, but a joint and structural approach in councils is lacking. This impedes systematic improvement and leaves the handling of problems to the responsibility of individuals. The study also shows how differently councillors experience and evaluate the culture of discussion

in their municipality. For example, women are not only affected by sexist transgressions, but also often perceive the entire discussion culture as too harsh and too dominantly male. Women evidently have a harder time in local politics than their male colleagues, because they have to deal with specific assaults and assert themselves more strongly in the male-connotted field of local politics. If, therefore, the principle that women without a "thick skin" have no business in politics applies to conversation culture in local councils, this will reinforce existing problems of representation.

In particular, the person chairing the meetings plays a central role in both positive and negative respects – depending on how highly developed their competence in de-escalative discussion management is. However, other aspects, such as the presence of conflict-seeking individuals or populist factions in the council, the handling of emotionally charged or strongly polarising topics, are also significant variables.

The problems described are manifest: The deterioration in the culture of discussion observed by the councillors over the years requires action by politicians and civil society.

A central goal of the study is therefore the formulation and evaluation of concrete solutions. Training is one way to improve the communication skills of councillors and chairpersons. Another possibility is the development of a code for good discussion culture, in which a common understanding and jointly agreed obligations are laid down and which can encourage reflection within the council.

The aim of this study is therefore not only to take a closer look at a topic that has received little attention so far, but also to show local political actors concrete ways in which they can improve the culture of discussion and avoid transgressions as far as possible. First and foremost, our purpose is to support the voluntary councillors in their political work.

1 Forsa; Körber-Stiftung (2021): *Fighting hate and violence: local politicians arm themselves*. Available online at: <https://www.koerber-stiftung.de/gegen-hass-und-gewalt-kommunalpolitiker-wappnen-sich-2334>

2 Alin, S. et al. (2021): *'Insulted and threatened': Working conditions and experiences of abuse of councillors in Germany*. Berlin: Heinrich Böll Stiftung e.V.

3 AfD (Alternative für Deutschland) is a right-wing populist political party in Germany. Established in 2013, it is known for its opposition to immigration, Islam and the European Union. Currently (Feb. 2023) AfD holds 78 out of 736 seats in the German Bundestag, where it is the only party represented whose environmental and climate policy is based on the denial of human-caused climate change. In March 2021, the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution placed AfD under surveillance as a suspected extremist group.

2. Methodology and sampling

- › A qualitative approach using in-depth interviews was selected.
- › The interviews followed guidelines designed to structure the conversations in terms of content and at the same time to ensure explorative openness.
- › In order to cover different perspectives, councillors from different parties and municipality sizes as well as from the former East and West of Germany were interviewed.

Previous studies on discussion culture have often focussed on civic participation, external political communication or the digital sphere. There is a lack of studies that map the experience and perspective of the councillors concerned in relation to discussion culture in municipal and local councils.

Therefore, an explorative approach by means of qualitative in-depth interviews was chosen. Qualitative research not only makes it possible to explore new, previously unknown facts and perspectives, it is also able to fathom individual motives, thoughts and emotions. In-depth interviews can be used to explore personal experiences that can

nevertheless be compared with each other on the basis of structured guidelines. By wording questions openly and in a confidential interview atmosphere, respondents are given the opportunity to express freely how they personally feel about the conversation culture⁴ in local and municipal councils and how they arrive at this assessment. This prevents the respondents from being forced too much into the corset of a questionnaire and important answers from being lost. In-depth interviews are therefore particularly suitable for analysing how local politicians perceive the culture of conversation.

To this end, a total of 30 guideline-based in-depth interviews were conducted with local

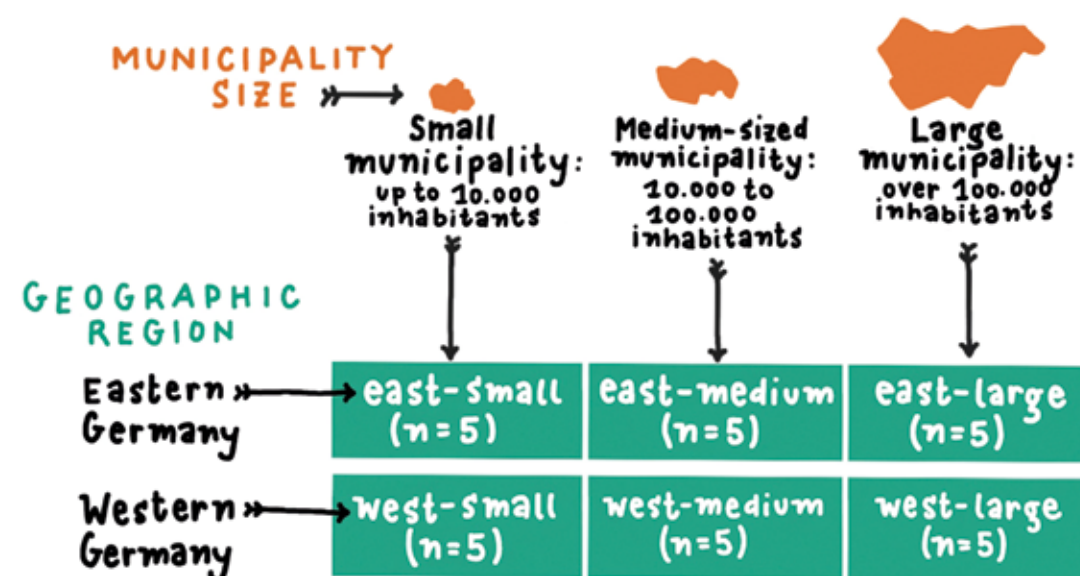


Figure 1 Municipality clusters

politicians from August to September 2021. With the help of the guidelines, it was ensured that all relevant topics were addressed, e.g. the assessment of the culture of conversation, their own affectedness as well as the evaluation of approaches to improving the culture of conversation. At the same time, the necessary openness was accorded in order to be able to explore the experiences and perspectives of the councillors. Initially, all persons who were active in municipal or local councils at the time of the interviews were considered as interviewees. In order to avoid systematic bias in the selection of interviewees, a randomised list was drawn up from a list of all municipalities in Germany. To take into account the different geographical contexts of the local politicians, six municipality clusters were also generated. Here, a differentiation was made between East and West Germany and three municipality sizes (up to 10,000 inhabitants, between 10,000 and 100,000 inhabitants and over 100,000 inhabitants). Municipalities were therefore randomly drawn from the clusters and their local or municipal council members were contacted. This ensured that all municipalities had an equal chance of being included in the sample.

In a second step, councillors were selected from the drawn municipalities on the basis of various characteristics such as gender or party. This procedure is based on the method of purposive sampling, in which a sample is selected on the basis of theory-based assumptions. The aim is to achieve a spread across certain characteristics.

It was taken into account that municipalities both with and without an AfD parliamentary group are included. The basic thesis here is that the AfD presence has a direct influence on the culture of discussion in the local and municipal councils. Furthermore, in selecting the respondents, a balanced gender ratio was aimed for and achieved (female: n=15, male: n=15). In addition, a balanced spread was aimed for among the parties in order to reflect the experiences and perspectives of members of different parties (see Figure 2).

PARTY	♀	♂	TOTAL
CDU/CSU	4	1	5
SPD	1	2	3
BÜNDNIS 90/DIE GRÜNEN	2	2	4
FDP	1	3	4
DIE LINKE.	1	2	3
AFD	2	1	3
FREIE WÄHLER	2	2	4
Independent/others	2	2	4
TOTAL	15	15	30

Figure 2 Party affiliation and gender ratio of local politicians interviewed

The interviews were fully transcribed. The method of analysis chosen was an interpretative evaluation method, with the interviews being coded. This ensures analytical openness on the one hand and a rule-governed, intersubjective evaluation process on the other. The coding of the interviews was carried out on the basis of a category system that was specially designed for the study. The development followed a mix of induction and deduction, i.e. based both on the structure of the guidelines and on the statements of the interviewees.

The qualitative study primarily shows the subjective perspective of the councillors and allows a deep and detailed insight into the culture of conversation in local politics. In order to be able to make representative statements about the topic, however, the aspects researched here would have to be further investigated in terms of quantity.

⁴ In the interviews, the term "conversation culture" was used in order to explore the topic in a low-threshold manner. Conversation culture here meant any communication or discussion that takes place within the council or one's own parliamentary group and how this was subjectively experienced and classified by the council members. Based on the statements of the councillors, the model of "discussion culture" was then developed for this publication and this term is predominantly used from chapter 3 onwards.

3. Definition of discussion culture

- › This study is based on Habermas' concept of deliberation and borrows from Jürg Steiner's Discourse Quality Index derived from it. This index functions as a quantitative measuring instrument to determine the quality of discourse in the political sphere.
- › Deliberation here means the equitable exchange of arguments with the aim of reaching the "best" decision.
- › In order to reflect the perspective of the councillors interviewed, a separate model of discussion culture was empirically developed from the material.
- › This consists of five dimensions: Absence of transgressions, mutual respect, professionalism and objectivity, openness and willingness to compromise, and parity.

This study examines the culture of discussion in municipal and local councils as well as in the parliamentary groups. To this end, the question must be clarified as to what councillors understand by a good culture of discussion. When do the councillors consider the limit of fair discourse to have been crossed, when is the tone too harsh and considered an attack or an insult?

In a first step, the subject under investigation, the culture of discussion, must be examined in detail. For this purpose, the Discourse Quality Index according to Steiner et al. (2005) is presented. Subsequently, on the basis of the empirical results of the study, an internal model of discussion culture adapted to the subject of research is developed and linked to the criteria of the Discourse Quality Index. This should also ensure comparability with other studies.

In order to understand why a culture of discussion is fundamental to democracy, it is first necessary to elucidate the concept of deliberation. Deliberation, according to Jürgen Habermas, is a discursive process in which joint decision-making

based on argumentative exchange is key. The central idea is that decisions are made and solutions are found jointly through the (preferably equitable) exchange of arguments. These should be based on the strongest argument and thus, according to Habermas, satisfy the demands of reason. Habermas defines deliberation as the decisive element of a democracy⁵.

Deliberation: An ideal for discussions

In short, the focus here is on decisions for which the best solution has been jointly discussed beforehand, irrespective of power constellations among the participants in the discourse. Decisions made in this way have a high degree of legitimacy as they can be explained and made comprehensible to others. Deliberation can thus be regarded as an ideal for the culture of discussion in local politics. This study also addresses this issue.

A good basis for the analysis of the discussion culture in local and municipal councils is provided by Steiner et al. (2005) with the development of their Discourse Quality Index.⁶ Here, the authors put Habermas' concept of deliberative politics⁷ into

practice and relate it concretely to discourses in parliaments. The quality of debates can be measured on the basis of various characteristics that can be analysed in concrete terms. (1) Participation is understood to mean that every member of parliament can speak freely and is involved without being interrupted. Also relevant is whether politicians (2) argue with factual correctness and tell the truth. With the (3) level of justification, it can be determined to what extent the debaters justify their demands in terms of substance. In addition, it should be examined whether a demand serves the (4) common good in that certain social groups, the entire population or only individuals are addressed by measures and would benefit. This includes the recurrent examination of one's own arguments with regard to their common good. Furthermore, in accordance with the Index, it should be examined whether communication is conducted with (5) respect. This includes the observance of certain behavioural forms by the participants. Finally, the (6) constructiveness of the discourse is named as an important element. This is understood to mean the willingness to compromise and tolerance towards other views.

The concept of the Discourse Quality Index is usually applied to measure discourse quality on the basis of observation or plenary minutes, for example, and quantitative methods are often used here as well.⁸ Subjective perspectives and experiences of politicians have not been recorded to date. Therefore, the Index is not simply applied to the interviews studied here, but a separate model of discussion culture is developed from the material – with recourse to the Discourse Quality Index. Thus, although the dimensions mentioned provide a good framework for further analysis, not all dimensions are transferable one-to-one to the topic of this study.

Empirical derivation of the terms

The approach of the study was deliberately exploratory in order to tie in with the perspective of the councillors. For this reason, the term "discussion culture" is preferred to "discourse quality" by Steiner et al. "Discussion" is, on the one hand, closer to what MPs would give as a self-description of their parliamentary negotiating. "Culture", on the other hand, ties in directly with the concept of "conversation culture" asked about in the inter-

views, which aims more at what is customary than at measurability. The model of discussion culture used in this sense thus draws on the theoretical foundations of the Discourse Quality Index. At the same time, however, it is derived from the empirical results of the study. On the one hand, this procedure aims at openness with regard to the material and, on the other hand, comparability with other studies.

The study reveals a very similar basic understanding of discussion culture among the councillors. In particular, there is a high degree of agreement with regard to the point at which the territory of fair discourse is abandoned. There are no differences in terms of municipality size, party affiliation or gender. The line is crossed for the local politicians when statements become in any way defamatory.

“When it becomes personal, when it becomes personally insulting and therefore also not objective, because then it is no longer about the issue.”⁹

(Linke, f, east-small)

In the opinion of the councillors, verbal attacks, devaluations or insinuations in particular do not belong in a debate. A lack of decency towards other local politicians can express itself, if nothing else, in the use of swear words or insults. A somewhat harsher tone is not always undesirable and is sometimes accepted as long as the debate remains conciliatory overall.

“Of course there are limits to any discussion. It mustn't go below the belt. If one person said to the other: 'You asshole', that would of course be completely unacceptable.”

(CDU, f, east-small)

“If it simply gets too personal and hurtful outside the political issue, then the discourse is already over. I do think it's okay to have a tough discussion. But it should all be done in such a way that you can still look the other person in the eye.”

(FDP, m, west-large)

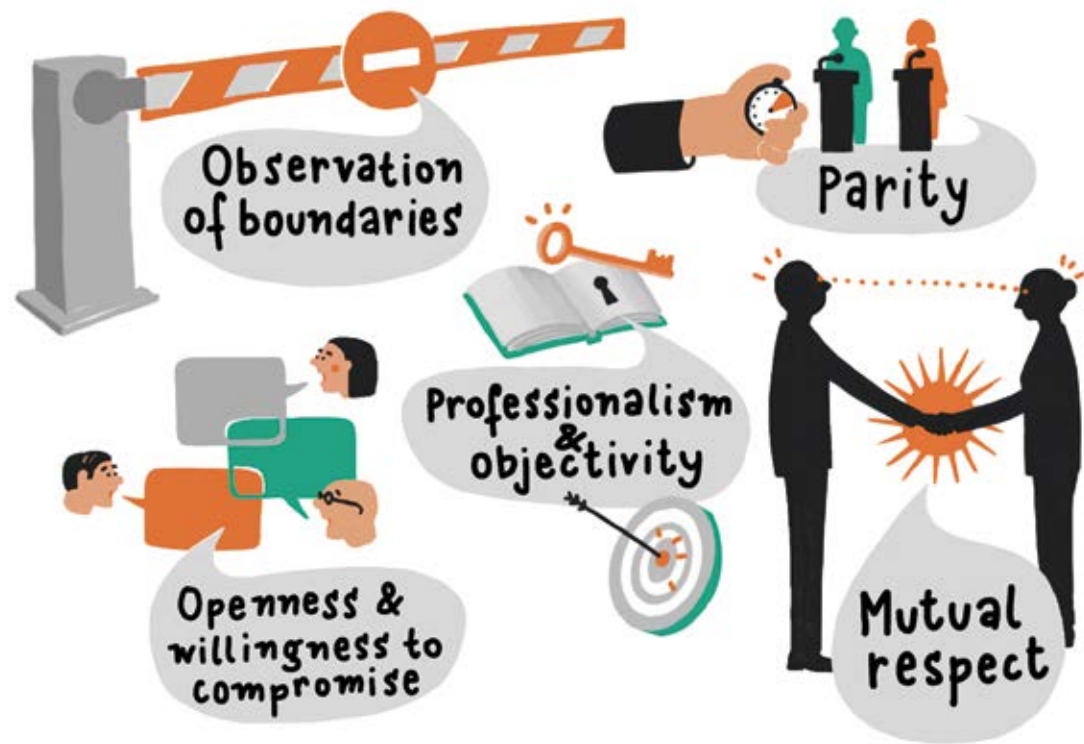


Figure 3 The dimensions of discussion culture

In any case, the line is crossed when it is not positions or arguments that are addressed, but individuals in a disparaging manner. For example, by quoting from their private and family lives without them having introduced these into the debate themselves. Or by directly or ironically alluding to the physical appearance and health of debate participants. Blatant transgressions occur when speakers refer to others in a sexist manner.

The dimensions of discussion culture

Taking the understanding of the councillors into account, a multi-layered model of the discussion culture can be established (see Figure 3). Its individual dimensions are in part mutually dependent, but each should be considered separately in order to be able to conduct a solution-oriented and fruitful debate. The dimensions mentioned by Steiner et al. are partly summarised in the model and introduced in the following way:

- › **Observance of boundaries:** All participants refrain from personal hostility, insults, ironic allusions to the idiosyncrasies or weaknesses of other discussion participants or any other defamation. Their private or family life is taboo unless they bring it into the discussion themselves. Sexist or racist insinuations are to be avoided.
- › **Mutual respect:** For many, a good culture of discussion means treating each other with respect, for example by letting the other person finish, listening to each other and being polite to each other. The local politicians expect each other to show a willingness to listen. It is therefore a question of the attitude with which the discussion is conducted towards others. Respect also plays a key role in the Discourse Quality Index of Steiner et al.

- › **Professionalism and objectivity:** An informed discussion and an exchange of objective arguments and attitudes are desired. This is understood to be a purposeful and effective debate that is not protracted unnecessarily. The local politicians also express the wish that facts be presented truthfully and that no statements be taken out of context or distorted. This dimension appears in the Discourse Quality Index under the term “truth”.
- › **Openness and willingness to compromise:** The interviewees also called for a willingness to reassess positions following discussions, not to remain inflexible, and the ability to compromise. In the context of the Discourse Quality Index, this is understood to be “constructiveness” in the form of tolerance and willingness to compromise with other positions.
- › **Parity:** A discussion thrives on the exchange of different positions and perspectives. Therefore, it is important to many respondents that all councillors can participate in the discussions as equitably as possible. This includes being mindful of one’s own speaking time and not taking up too much space within the debate oneself. Here, too, the perspective of the local politicians

is similar to the Discourse Quality Index, in which this dimension is referred to as “participation”. The councillors also emphasise that it is important that everyone participates in the debate and represents their position in the council. Disagreement and argument on the matter at hand are definitely desired.

“I think it’s good if you approach issues in depth and stand up for your opinion. Stick to your opinion, defend it robustly, but also allow yourself to be educated when there are opposing facts.”

(AfD, m, east-medium)

“The fact that people open their mouths at all in local politics, apart from the spokespersons or the parliamentary group chairpersons. It’s always just the same one, two or three people talking. And a good culture of conversation would also allow for others to have their say, so that means members from the second or third row as well.”

(Link, m, west-medium)

5 Habermas, J. (1998): *Between Facts and Norms*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press.
6 Steiner, J. et al. (2005): *Deliberative Politics in Action. Analysing Parliamentary Discourse*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
7 Among many other remarks by Habermas, the authors refer primarily to:
Habermas, J. (1998): *Between Facts and Norms*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press.
8 The following work on the culture of discussion in German parliaments can be mentioned here, for example: Spöndli, M. (2003): *Discourse quality and political decisions: an empirical analysis of debates in the German Conference Committee*. (Discussion Papers/Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin für Sozialforschung, Research Field Civil Society, Conflicts and Democracy, Civil Society and Transnational Networks Department, 2003–101). Berlin: Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin für Sozialforschung gGmbH.
9 The language of the oral quotations of the interviewees reproduced in the study report has been adjusted for better readability.

4. Evaluation: How are discussions conducted?

- › Most councillors rank the quality of debates in their council as being in the middle range.
- › Frequently, the dimensions of the culture of discussion (mutual respect, professionalism and objectivity, openness and willingness to compromise, as well as parity) are not or only insufficiently fulfilled.
- › Only a few councillors are very satisfied with the culture of discussion.
- › The culture of discussion in the parliamentary group, on the other hand, is rated by the councillors as being good to very good, and the dimensions are seen as mostly fulfilled.



Figure 4 Evaluation of the culture of discussion in the council

Based on the in-depth interviews with the council members, a model for discussion culture drawing on Habermas' concept of deliberation and the Discourse Quality Index according to Steiner et al. was developed in the present study. This model records the perspectives and experiences of the councillors and thus provides a good framework for analysing the quality of local political debate. In addition to the definition of transgressions in discussions, four further dimensions of the culture of discussion were elaborated which serve as a basis for the present study: Mutual respect, professionalism and objectivity, openness and willingness to compromise, and parity. Using said model as a basis, this chapter is now concerned with answering the question: What is the quality of debates at the municipal level? More specifically, how do councillors evaluate them within their local or municipal council and within their own parliamentary group?

Evaluation of the culture of discussion in local and municipal councils

Most of the councillors rank the discussion culture in their council as middling. If we look at this evaluation in terms of school grades from 1 down to 6, the councillors give it an average of "2.8". Only in a few councils were there any transgressions, while the other dimensions of the discussion culture also received poor grades. Accordingly, despite the absence of transgressions in some municipal councils, the culture of discussion was only described as satisfactory or worse overall. In other local councils, the culture of discussion was awarded a "2" despite occasional transgressions (defined as a few times a year). In these cases, the discussions were perceived as – generally speaking – moderate and constructive, as well as factual and informed. Only very few councillors expressed full satisfaction and ranked the quality of their debates as excellent (grade "1").

No matter how positively the councillors evaluated the culture of discussion, (minor) conflicts or incidents perceived as problematic or even transgressive were nevertheless mentioned everywhere in the course of the interviews. Evidently, individual councillors sometimes tend to rate the culture of discussion in their council as good across the board, despite deficits with regard to the discussion culture. One possible explanation is that the councillors do not want to be seen as "traitors" and do not want to bring problems in their own councils out into the open. However, such effects were broken down in the course of the survey, as the experience of discussion culture was then reflected on in detail in each case. It should also be noted that some councils are more resilient than others. What the resilient councils have in common is examined in chapter 6 under the point "Contextual conditions for a good discussion culture".

"Showmanship is one point. We had one person who constantly repeated their position. I find that unbearable because it simply ceases to have any meaning."

(Green, f, west-medium)

"I find it annoying when we spend six, seven hours in town hall meetings, which we all do on a voluntary basis. We all still have jobs to do as well."

(Green, m, east-large)

"There are actually three or four councillors who have never uttered a sound. I didn't even know they had vocal cords. They also never contradict the mayor."

(CDU, f, west-small)

“A fairly typical disagreement can definitely get a bit more nasty: Two people are arguing, and the argument escalates – just like at home in the family.”

(FDP, m, west-large)

Overall, there is scope for improvement in the culture of discussion: It can be said that there is often potential for improving mutual respect, professionalism and objectivity, openness and willingness to compromise, as well as the equal involvement of all members, at least in parts.

Evaluation of the culture of discussion within one's own parliamentary group

The evaluation of the discussion culture within the parliamentary groups is much more positive. The quality of the debate there is described by the councillors as constructive, respectful, honest and harmonious. Overall, the councillors are interested in a debate in which divergent opinions are also discussed and the participants (willingly) work towards a common compromise. Unity is particularly relevant to enable the parliamentary groups to present themselves subsequently with one voice in the council and to assert themselves there. In some cases, even friendships have grown out of the work of the parliamentary groups. Although differences of opinion sometimes lead to controversial discussions, they almost never lead to transgressive behaviour. If problems do arise, face-to-face conversations are conducted to settle them.

In many cases, especially in smaller municipalities, the groups consist of only a few people. Sometimes there are only two, sometimes smaller groups of three to four people. Communication within a small group and the absence of individual troublemakers can at least partly explain the positive deviation from the culture of discussion in the municipal and local councils.

“And it doesn't matter if you were out-matched or if you were a bit harder on each other. At the very latest, over the next glass of red wine, in the pub or something, everything is fine. No one is offended for very long. Which is of course also due to the fact that no one has gone overboard or debated and argued inappropriately beforehand.”

(CDU, f, east-medium)

“My parliamentary colleague and I harmonise very well with each other. I would say that we are on friendly terms. We are even thinking of working together again in the coming legislative period.”

(Green, f, west-medium)

For the most part, all dimensions of the discussion culture (observance of boundaries, mutual respect, professionalism and objectivity, openness and willingness to compromise, and parity) are fulfilled within the parliamentary groups.

In general, work within the parliamentary group is described as close. The focus is on a process of discussion and negotiation to find a common approach – this requires good cooperation and goodwill towards the parliamentary group colleagues. Much more so than in the council, a common identity comes into play here – the parliamentary group members see themselves as a team that works together.

“Difficult conflicts can only be resolved in a culture of conversation and communication that appreciates different partial truths, allows different positions to stand and then brings them together in a shared effort.”

Schulz von Thun:

„Die Kunst des Miteinander Redens“,

(“The Art of Talking to Each Other”), 2020

5. Harsh tone: How to deal with it?

- › The councillors are rarely confronted with transgressions. More often they experience violations such as teasing and a harsh tone, insufficient preparation for the meeting, unwillingness to discuss, and overly dominant or silent councillors.
- › These experiences are perceived as a burden and have a negative effect on motivation – even though none of the councillors interviewed is currently considering quitting local politics.
- › In dealing with transgressions or improving the culture of discussion, a strong individualisation and subjectivisation of the problem is evident.
- › Nevertheless, violations of the dimensions of the discussion culture must be addressed strategically and structurally. This is where possible starting points for external stimuli to support the councillors emerge.

Having looked at how councillors evaluate the culture of discussion in the council as well as in their own parliamentary group in general, the focus will now be more on specific experiences, individual behaviour and the effects on personal motivation.

Culture of discussion experienced in the council

Almost all councillors see themselves affected by (minor) disturbances in the culture of discussion. These can be allocated to the dimensions listed.

- › **Observance of boundaries:** Councillors report transgressions comparatively rarely. Where they do occur, however, it is in half of all meetings or even more frequently. These are personal verbal attacks or even insults. According to the interviewees, this is often done to influence the dis-

cussion in an unfair manner. They mentioned the spreading of rumours to directly attack and delegitimise individual councillors. Aggressive gestures and words were also used, such as derogatory comments, using an abusive tone, or the banging of fists on the table.

- › **Mutual respect:** Negative incidents described include teasing, rude discussions or a harsh tone as well as interrupting. Disruptions such as laughter or derogatory comments were also reported.
- › **Professionalism and objectivity:** There are reports of a lack of background information and preparation by other councillors. A professional and productive discussion is therefore said to be considerably hindered and one's own work made more difficult. In addition, unobjective or unproductive discussions in which individuals promote themselves or the deliberate misunderstanding and distortion of contexts are perceived

as onerous. Individual councillors also experienced false facts being spread or information being taken out of context with a view to pushing through individual goals.

- › **Openness and willingness to compromise:** Discussions were perceived as negative and not very purposeful when individual councillors refused to deviate from their opinion and remained closed to other arguments. This prevented fruitful discussions and the negotiation of a compromise.
- › **Parity:** In the opinion of the councillors, a good culture of discussion certainly includes an exchange of blows and therefore a debate – even a tough one at times. In this context, meetings are criticised in which decisions are made without much discussion or weighing of opinions and positions. There are also problems with members who do not actively participate in meetings, who are too dominant or who take up too much talking time.

“Sometimes municipal representatives yell at each other and don't let each other finish. It's not always like that, but out of ten agenda items, there might be one where some are really aggressive with each other and forget that it's about a voluntary office. That happens a lot, certainly in two out of four meetings a year.”

(Other, f, east-small)

“Rumours about me have been spread around – perhaps because my factual arguments do not provide an adequate target. Ultimately, you also expose yourself to danger. Someone claimed I was having an affair. And that really goes beyond the pale.”

(FW, m, east-small)

“I made a suggestion for improvement to the mayor today, to which he replied that if I thought I knew better, why wasn't I the mayor? To me, that meant he was no longer being objective.”

(FW, m, west-small)

There are differences with regard to party affiliation. Members of both the Left (Linke) Party and the right-wing parties are sometimes attacked for their party affiliation. This is most evident in the case of the AfD. Two out of three AfD councillors interviewed declared themselves particularly dissatisfied with the culture of discussion and reported transgressions such as being called a Nazi, a strict refusal to cooperate and the exclusion of AfD members from political work. It must be noted here, however, that exclusion by others fits the self-image of a party working against the “political establishment”. This framing is also actively practised by the AfD councillors interviewed. Linke councillors, on the other hand, do not report being excluded, but they do report being insulted by individual members for belonging to a party succeeding the former east German communist SED. This is seen by those affected as a personal attack and accordingly experienced as being burdensome.

“What really bothers me as well is that you were labelled a Nazi.”

(AfD, f, east-large)

“You are also excluded from certain discussion groups. So basically, everyone is against the AfD.”

(AfD, m, east-medium)

Furthermore, women in particular experience gender-specific transgressions in local politics. They are insulted in a different way to their male colleagues and personally attacked. Female councillors, for example, recounted comments about their appearance or weight, while none of the men interviewed reported comments about their appearance. Women also reported having their competence disputed or not being taken seriously. The female local politicians perceive these situations as personal attacks that happen to them because of their gender. They can thus be defined as sexist transgressions. They often refer to stereotypical attributions of femininity and to patterns of thinking that, for example, emphasise appearance while denying their competence in areas such as politics or technology, e. g. the image of the housewife or the apolitical woman.



Figure 5 Approaches to improving the culture of discussion

“I was once called an ‘accessory’ by the parliamentary group leader. It’s mainly men who chair the parliamentary groups. There are actually more men called Thomas than there are female mayors.”

(SPD, f, west-medium)

Council members’ handling of poor discussion culture

Council members who report regular abuse or defamatory transgressions often feel abandoned by the chair of the meeting and the lack of moderation. Improvements in the culture of discussion are also rarely addressed in the council or by the chair of the meeting. There is a lack of common rules for discussion. Dealing with abuse is consequently defined as “your own” problem and accordingly a means of solving the problem individually is sought. This often stems from the belief that there is little that can be done about the situation and that it is therefore better to come to terms with it or even ignore it.

On the other hand, some councillors openly address conflicts, disruptions of the discussion culture and even transgressions. Possibilities here include tackling the conflict or countering attacks and disruptions. However, success here depends strongly on the acceptance of the person transgressing and does not always work. Particularly in the case of individual troublemakers, this strategy is rarely considered. Furthermore, councillors with a more forthright character in particular contemplate these open strategies. They have grown a thick skin and usually have more experience in local politics.

“I am very self-assured and will counterattack if necessary. And if my opposite number makes it impossible for me to discuss things objectively, then I don’t have to continue the discussion with him.”

(Linke, f, east-small)

In individual cases, the local politicians concerned arrive at conciliatory solutions: For example, by

holding many conversations, e.g. in private as well as in larger groups or within a parliamentary group, the discussion and working atmosphere was improved and existing communication problems were solved. One of the councillors interviewed was also very successful in mediating conflicts between disputing parties, as he was able to draw on soft skills from his professional experience.

In addition, an exchange within the party and parliamentary group and the mutual emotional support that comes with it can help to deal with stressful situations. However, this is contrasted by criticism of the remaining councillors, who would often remove themselves from difficult situations. Yet intergroup solidarity in particular can be of great importance. This is shown by the example of a female local politician who was insulted in a sexist way. In response, women from all factions stood by her and helped her resolve the conflict. The councillor who recounted this situation highlighted this approach as particularly positive and helpful.

Admittedly, the examples above only provide starting points for improving the culture of discussion also in structural terms. Nevertheless, it should be noted that a shared exchange on the quality of debates or conflict mediation as well as solidarity among council members can help to address existing problems.

“I try to avoid this escalation by mediating spontaneously and remaining objective. It’s a mixture of life experience and professional experience. I used to run a medical centre with 30 or 40 staff. You learn how to assess the individual people a bit. Everyone is different and you have to try to find a way to get everyone on the same page.”

(CDU, f, east-small)

“We have breaks and parliamentary group meetings, and the major and minor failures of other parliamentary groups are also discussed there. That’s where people support each other. But it is not the case that there is now a professional support system that specifically addresses this issue.”

(SPD, m, east-large)

“I would like to see more solidarity among ourselves. I remember a situation when we all stood up against an attack on a female municipal representative. It was a nice feeling to stand together like that and, regardless of political affiliation, simply speak out against behaviour that I find intolerable.”

(CDU, f, east-medium)

Stress and effects on motivation

A poor discussion culture is perceived as being stressful by the councillors interviewed. It can rob them of the joy and sense of purpose in their political work. Long and unproductive meetings or a harsh tone in discussions exacerbate the stresses that already accompany the honorary office of local politics. Sometimes councillors regularly go into their meetings with a bad feeling and weigh up whether another negative discussion experience might occur. Consequently, a good culture of discussion is very important to politicians.

“There is by no means always an aggressive mood, yet every now and then, looking at the agenda, you wonder if there is anything that might bring one about.”

(Other, f, east-small)

Nevertheless, only a handful of the councillors interviewed say that they have thought about quitting because of the poor discussion culture within the council. The limits of what is tolerable do not seem to have been exceeded (yet); they are intrinsically motivated to continue. Similarly, the respondents suspect that the poor quality of the debates is not the main reason why some councillors want to resign or that some parties have problems recruiting new members. Here, aspects such as the high time demands played a greater role. Nevertheless, they think that a poor discussion culture is a significant burden that is added to the difficult working conditions. Moreover, almost all of them see a progressive deterioration of the discussion culture as being problematic.

At this point, it is important to point out a possible bias due to the selection of the interview partners: The study only covers councillors who continue to be involved in local politics. It therefore remains unclear how many other people have



Figure 6 The culture of discussion – a task for democracy

already left due to the culture of discussion. A look at the interviewees' environment provides an indication of this: some councillors state that they know people who have resigned from office and withdrawn from local politics because of transgressions. Occasionally, the assumption is expressed that women in particular could be deterred by a poor culture of discussion. For example, one councillor reports about his daughter who would not enter local politics explicitly because of the harsh tone in the council.

A poor discussion culture and any transgressions experienced have a stronger effect on people's motivation to remain involved in their own parliamentary group. Two councillors reported that they had had negative experiences within their former parliamentary group in the past. In both cases, this led to a change of party.

This points to two things: On the one hand, it can be assumed that negative experiences in the parliamentary group, i.e. in a collegiate group, are

more stressful. In addition, it shows that councillors do indeed take the option of freeing themselves from the stressful situation by leaving their own parliamentary group. However, if such conflicts arise in the municipal or local council, the only solution seems to be to leave local politics altogether. This is an option that the councillors surveyed would not currently choose. What remains open, however, is the unreported number of those who have already quit because of the culture of discussion or who did not even enter local politics in the first place.

“You get very agitated, very emotional, because you are being attacked personally. And because it happens so frequently, you sometimes go to the meetings with a queasy feeling and are glad when it's over.”

(Other, f, east-small)

“Other factors are more important when it comes to motivation. The question of reconciling family and work or family and voluntary work is actually the bigger problem. But debate culture is definitely also one of them. If you say as a young person that you want to go into politics motivated by good intentions, the culture of debate is an initial obstacle. I spend half a decade of my life in the town council and have to put up with that?”

(SPD, m, east-large)

“We had a young woman who got attacked a lot. The culture there is not so good and she always felt very offended. And I think that's why she didn't run again in 2009. She was very upset by it all, she really couldn't take it when things got so personal.”

(Linke, f, east-small)

“But of course this is a stressful situation. You do it in your free time and that is also the reason why many people pull out. They say: 'I don't need to put myself through that'”.

(FDP, m, east-small)

The culture of discussion – a task for democracy

Among the respondents, there is something akin to an ethos of resilience. Problems and burdens are dealt with on one's own and often simply endured or ignored. This approach contributes to the individualisation of local politics and to the shifting

of social responsibility onto the shoulders of individuals. Shoulders that already have a lot to carry in voluntary local political office. The commitment of citizens thus becomes a test of endurance – a situation that should not be permanent in a democracy that is largely sustained by local politics.

Local politics is already a precarious business: time-consuming, usually only symbolically remunerated and all with scant public recognition. When transgressions and poor discussion culture are added to this, this is a problem and shows the need for action. It is not very helpful to say that without a thick skin, one (as a woman) has no place in politics. This must be rejected because it violates the principle of deliberative decision-making, in which every voice, even the quiet one, is accorded equal weight.

Local politics is a crucial pillar of our democracy. Municipal and local council meetings are places where debates are held and decisions are made that directly impact citizens. In addition, it is here that they can most easily get involved themselves and experience politics directly. This makes politics tangible and accessible at the local level, and it is often conducted by laypersons rather than professional politicians. A good culture of discussion in the council of a municipality can set an example for negotiation processes in other parts of the community or city and can possibly have a soothing effect where the atmosphere is heated. In any event, it encourages participation in local politics. Maintaining an appropriate culture of discussion is therefore nothing less than a precondition for democracy.

6. Contextual conditions

- › The competent and calm chairing of meetings has a positive effect on the culture of discussion and can improve the handling of any transgressions experienced.
- › A discussion culture that is perceived as poor is often linked to individual persons. This shows that councillors are not professional politicians: There is often a lack of professionally learned competence in conducting discussions and resolving conflicts, as well as a lack of time for thorough familiarisation with the content and preparation for meetings.
- › Other factors that play a part here are the lack of competence in de-escalating and mediating, certain topics (e.g. municipal budget, emotionally charged topics), certain parties (AfD), the gender of the councillors or the temporal context (election campaign).
- › The (social) media have a less direct effect on the culture of discussion. The local press plays the most important role. Here, balanced and factual reporting is required.

The previous chapters discussed in detail the culture of discussion in the councils and the parliamentary groups, how the individual councillors experience it themselves, how they cope with it and what effects the manner of communication has on their motivation to be involved in local politics. The aim now is to examine what determines the culture of discussion externally. On the one hand, this is indispensable for a deeper understanding. On the other hand, it is important in order to be able to develop suitable strategies and possible solutions.

The interviews conducted for this study also show at this point that there are no monocausal explanations. Instead, there are various factors that interact with each other to influence the quality of the discussion culture. These factors are examined individually below.

Contextual conditions for a good discussion culture

Fact-oriented and open cooperation is crucial for a good assessment of the discussion culture for the councillors. Most importantly, however, almost all of them report the relevance of a competent chairperson who structures and leads the meeting well and moderates conflicts.

If this is the case, the councillors usually perceive the discussion atmosphere in the council as positive even when transgressions and other rule violations occur. The chairing of meetings can therefore be seen as a central factor for a good discussion culture – it can mitigate or exacerbate the effects of other negative contextual factors. At the same time, it has been shown that a good discussion culture also facilitates the handling of transgressions, difficult factions or individuals.

“On our council, it is not the case that people really engage with what their opposite number wants and do not try to push through their interests with preconceived opinions and neither listen to nor internalise the other person’s arguments. And conversation culture always presupposes listening to others, actively engaging with them.”

(FDP, m, east-small)

“It’s important to listen to your opposite number, to show an interest in them, to let them talk, but also to have your own say – it’s give and take!”

(SPD, f, west-medium)

“In all honesty, our meetings are already very well structured, which is definitely due to the special charisma of the mayor, who chairs the meetings very well. Absolutely essential!”

(FDP, m, east-small)

Contextual conditions for a poor discussion culture

The influence of individuals

The difficult personalities of individual councillors are most frequently named as a factor having a bad effect. Consequently, individuals are sufficient to have a negative impact on the entire discussion culture, especially if they hold important positions and/or their contributions to the discussion are not consistently moderated by the chair of the meeting. These individuals are often dominant, confrontational or not very open to other viewpoints. They lack the ability or willingness to discuss and resolve conflicts in a factual and calm manner. They therefore do not observe any of the dimensions for good discourse: observing boundaries, treating others with respect, professionalism and objectivity, openness and willingness to compromise, and parity in the involvement of all councillors.

This is often where full-time professional experience comes into play. For example, people with HR responsibility or in social professions some-

times have different approaches to communication and experience with conflict resolution and therefore a higher level of discourse competence. On the other hand, leadership experience can also manifest itself negatively in dominant behaviour.

“And unfortunately, politics also attracts a lot of people who are just attention-seekers. In every parliamentary group they have one or two people where they say: ‘My goodness!’”

(Grüne, m, east-large)

“Purely from a professional point of view, we are a pretty mixed bunch in the local council. If one of them is a craftsman with his own business, for example, he sometimes imagines he’s the boss of the local council.”

(SPD, m, west-small)

Requirements of the honorary office

Even if transgressions are only described as a problem of individuals, confrontation with them is problematic for structural reasons: After all, local politicians are normal citizens who have not been prepared or trained for their office. This is illustrated by a positive counter-example from a municipality where a council meeting with conflict potential was defused by the moderation of a trained person from the administration. The councillor reporting emphasises that such mediation between conflicting parties would have been difficult for laypersons – such as the councillors themselves.

The dimension of professionalism and objectivity also has a structural background. For example, it is mentioned that some councillors are not sufficiently informed or prepared to have a fruitful discussion at meetings. These are supposedly isolated cases, but they point to the fact that honorary political offices fundamentally require preparation and information. After all, local politics is a time-consuming office and councillors are not professional politicians but ordinary citizens: In addition to evening meetings, they have to familiarise themselves with issues, deal with legal principles, prepare motions, consult in committees,

etc. This requires time and effort that many councillors can barely afford. As a result, expert knowledge is sometimes lacking in discussions, as there is too little time for adequate familiarisation and preparation for meetings is usually subject to time constraints.

“We didn’t take 17 rhetoric courses in Berlin, we’re just normal citizens. So it’s possible that you might hurt others from time to time.”

(Linke, m, west-medium)

“Everyone is now working part-time or full-time at the same time. So naturally, you can only read up on the subject matter to a limited extent.”

(CDU, f, west-small)

Political and thematic areas

The thematic framework can also be decisive for the emergence of conflicts and disputes. Certain topics are conflict-laden and more often lead to disputes or even transgressions.

The personal involvement of local politicians is often the determining factor and leads to emotionality, e.g. on the issue of childcare among parents. In smaller municipalities, concern and emotionality often come to a head because the councillors are personally involved in the issues. In this context, conflicts were mentioned that resulted from a municipality merger, a gym renovation, the financing of fire-fighting service equipment (with members of the fire-fighting service in council positions) or the question of land for wind turbine construction.

There are also a number of “classic bones of contention” where the debate frequently veers off course. These include, on the one hand, topics that have a high priority for everyone – such as budget and investment issues, for example for renovations, fire-fighting service equipment, cycle paths or the like. This is often where fundamentally different stances of the parliamentary groups become apparent.

Moreover, issues of nationwide importance, such as climate protection, are emotionally charged. Here, certain parliamentary groups vehemently

defend their positions without being open to the viewpoints of others. This is particularly the case with the AfD when it comes to issues such as climate protection, migration, identity politics as well as questions of remembrance culture or cultural policy. The dimension of openness and willingness to compromise is not fulfilled here.

“But these are once or twice a year. It’s mostly about financial issues and then it’s the CDU that then simply advocates a different philosophy and goes overboard with it.”

(Linke, m, west-medium)

“Wind power is also a major issue. It’s just that many people hold very fundamental views on the subject. And then it’s difficult to maintain a good culture of discussion.”

(Grüne, f, west-medium)

“The AfD has one person on the council. So when it comes to climate, he doesn’t understand anything. You can’t discuss the topic with him.”

(Grüne, m, west-large)

Party affiliation

Affiliation to certain parliamentary groups plays a comparatively minor role in the culture of discussion. Here, the councillors see hardly any structural differences in discussion behaviour between parliamentary groups such as the CDU/CSU, the SPD, the Freie Wähler (Free Voters), the Greens, the FDP, the Left Party or other parties. And this role all the more minor, the smaller the council assembly is. It is only occasionally mentioned that Die Linke is less constructive or that the Greens are less capable of compromise. In addition, the accusation is sometimes made that councillors use meetings for self-promotion and to raise the profile of their parliamentary group. In this context, the focus is less on substantive policy and therefore on an informed debate that is concerned with the matter at hand (dimension of professionalism and objectivity) than on attacking other parties and promoting oneself in public.

“In my experience, there is basically no, really absolutely no difference between the parties.”

(Other, m, east-large)

The exceptions are the AfD and politically more right-wing or right-wing populist parties, voters’ associations or local lists, whose members are perceived as active troublemakers. They often take a stance against the “party-political establishment” and are openly confrontational. Here, it is not only differences in content that are responsible for it sometimes being difficult to debate objectively. For example, the AfD is said to sometimes try to provoke and actively undermine a meaningful debate through motions, contributions and heckling at the meetings. In one case, the AfD is supposed to have deliberately submitted fake motions, which were tedious and time-consuming to deal with. For all the councillors, who work on a voluntary basis and thus under time pressure, this is a heavy burden.

The mere arrival of the AfD and other populist parties in many municipal and local councils has also increased the fragmentation of the party landscape. This sometimes leads to an increased effort in obtaining a majority for resolutions, and cooperation between individual parliamentary groups becomes more fragile – again with negative consequences for the time resources of all council members.

In some cases, according to the councillors, the AfD is the only party responsible for transgressions in the form of verbal provocations or the prevention of productive council work, e.g. through fake motions or a large number of questions. It is conspicuous that this is reported exclusively from medium-sized and large municipalities, and increasingly from eastern Germany. Accordingly, medium-sized and in particular large municipalities in the east are most affected by an impairment of the culture of discussion due to the AfD’s arrival.

“Yes, there is a parliamentary group with a poor conversation culture. The AfD has a disastrous conversation culture, the tone is not appropriate for the institution. And then this constant posturing as the oppressed majority of normal Germans.”

(FDP, m, west-large)

“There was one person from this right-wing party that would sometimes place 30, 40 requests, which would then be taken to court. And that, of course, means a crippling, very tiring time delay.”

(CDU, m, west-large)

The AfD’s self-portrayal as victims is also confirmed by other studies, which see this as a targeted strategy. Through the local council, the AfD is said to seek in particular to orchestrate certain issues in the media. It allegedly tries to actively change public discourse by pushing the boundaries of what can be said.¹⁰

One question that often remains unanswered is how best to deal with the AfD and, with regard to the subject of the study, how can an improvement in the culture of discussion in local politics be established despite the presence of this party in some councils?

Sex/gender

Women are not only outnumbered in local politics¹¹, they also often perceive the culture of discussion differently. For example, some of the female councillors interviewed have the following perception of council debates: They feel that these are clearly male-dominated, too harsh, confrontational, dominant and self-promoting. In particular, old and very politically experienced men, who are occasionally referred to as “top dogs”, would strongly insist on their opinions, consider it to be the only correct one and would not be very open to other viewpoints – behaviour that contradicts the dimensions of professionalism and objectivity as well as openness and willingness to compromise.

Women sometimes have no choice but to accept this masculinised style – or to quit local politics. In addition, as already explained, there are sexist transgressions that only affect women: Being reduced to sex/gender, not being taken seriously, being actively overlooked or subjected to comments about their appearance or weight.

“There is a lot of male pride involved here. Having more women could definitely help. I often have the feeling that men behave in a far more confrontational way, yet don’t actually feel that way at all. When I recently

asked my husband and his male friend to stop arguing, they both said in amazement: 'Why? We're just having a discussion.'

(FDP, f, east-large)

“It is often the case with these alpha males that they repeat the question if they don't get the answer they want. And in terms of the conversation culture, they try to drag everything out. The motto is: 'Everything has already been said, but not yet by everyone'. How do I present myself? How do I put myself on display? Yes, that's men.”

(CDU, f, west-small)

A study on party cultures and the political participation of women describes the field of politics as male-dominated and dominated by male codes.¹² The interviewees in the present study confirm this: A harsh tone, extensive self-promotion, dominance and the implicit requirement for councillors not to be so sensitive are assumed to be normal by men and are reproduced in council meetings.

The predominance of a communication style that is perceived as masculine as well as the additional sex/gender-specific transgressions explain the underrepresentation of women in local politics. Conversely, this also highlights the possibility of promoting the representation of women in local politics by improving the culture of discussion.

Time and location frameworks

The time and location frameworks play a lesser role, but are regarded as (reinforcing) factors. For example, councillors note that the negative influence of party affiliation increases in election campaign phases. Effects such as the promotion and grandstanding of one's own party and the criticism and disparagement of competing parties become more pronounced here. The councillors are therefore more confrontational – a harsh tone and conflicts can increase as a result.

“Whenever there are any elections, things get a bit more abrasive during that period.”

(FW, f, west-medium)

Furthermore, it turns out that a poor tone as well as transgressions occur most frequently in the

council meetings themselves – the location framework can therefore also be seen as a contextual factor. There are differences between committee meetings or informal meetings on the one hand and council meetings on the other: In committees, interviewees report that discussions tend to be fact-oriented. Decisions then have to be made in the council, which can heat up the atmosphere and fuel conflicts. In council meetings, the focus is said to be more on presenting one's own positions and exchanging arguments, so there is more likely to be a harsh exchange of blows or confrontation, even transgressions.

“In the council meeting, you want to present your position. And then it's more of a hard-fought battle than in committees, for example.”

(AfD, f, east-large)

Social media

Popular opinion often attributes a great influence on the quality of discussions to social media. Councillors also hold these channels responsible for the polarisation of society and thus for the polarisation of local political work.

The majority of councillors surveyed use social media such as Twitter, Instagram and Facebook. The intensity of use correlates with the size of the municipality: While councillors in smaller municipalities hardly use social media, some in medium-sized municipalities do, and in large municipalities it happens frequently. However, the councillors often find using social media too time-consuming.

For many, it is difficult to assess whether, and if so to what extent, social media change the culture of discussion within the council or one's own parliamentary group. There is a broad consensus that it is not a “direct” influence: The use of these media does not lead to any significant changes, and disputes or discussions are rarely transferred from online platforms to council meetings. However, it is sometimes suspected that the possibility of self-promotion in social media has an impact on communication in the council. On the one hand, individual members would use council meetings more as a stage to then mirror this on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter or other platforms. On the other hand, they speak more cautiously because of the

latent fear of being humiliated in social media. The AfD in particular is accused of using a strategy of orchestration in social media, sometimes acting provocatively in order to exploit this subsequently in the media.

Most suspect an – albeit more subtle – influence. Social media are considered to have a fundamental influence on the culture of conversation in society and thus also on the culture of discussion within local politics. They are drivers of a polarisation of social discourse and also change the way members of a society talk to each other.

“Social media do not directly change the culture of conversation. It's not as if the AfD posts particularly nasty comments and then it's aired again in the council or something like that.”

(FDP, m, west-large)

“Social media play a certain role in that you don't enter into an in-depth discussion anymore because you have to worry that one careless word will immediately be torn apart in the local groups on Facebook.”

(CDU, f, east-medium)

Furthermore, parliamentary groups in medium-sized and larger towns and municipalities often have intra-party WhatsApp groups. There are isolated reports that digital exchange makes communication more careless and impersonal, and that misunderstandings and conflicts arise more quickly.

“Yes, I do believe that social media have an influence. When you write in a parliamentary group chat, for example, it quickly becomes impersonal. There is a lack of gestures and facial expressions. And then arguments arise more quickly.”

(Linke, m, west-medium)

Local press

The local press is considered to have a stronger influence on the quality of local political debates than social media. This is surprising insofar as public opinion very often problematises social

media, but less so the local press and its influence on the culture of discussion. However, the assessment of the influence of the traditional media varies from place to place and sometimes depends strongly on individual factors such as local newspapers and journalists.

Similarly to social media, the effects grow with increasing municipality size. In small municipalities the local press has hardly any effect on the culture of discussion in the council. In medium-sized and large municipalities, however, there is an increased impact: Sometimes there is an increased self-promotion of the councillors in the presence of the press or more cautious speaking due to the concern that statements taken out of context could appear in the local press. In addition, it is sometimes reported that the tone becomes more confrontational and harsh when journalists are present. Occasionally, it even happened that internal or false information was passed on to the press. This was perceived as a breach of confidentiality in the council and fuelled a climate of mistrust.

Across all sizes of municipalities, there have been some reports of poorly researched, one-sided or non-objective reporting of council meetings, e.g. omitting certain positions or placing quotes in the wrong context. Such one-sided or polarising reporting can fuel arguments within the council and lead to councillors being reluctant to speak out publicly for fear of bad reporting.

“My experience with the press is that they can be quite interpretative or just take whatever they like. You actually struggle to make decisions sometimes and I don't think you're as free when the press is there.”

(Other, f, west-large)

“When the media come, some colleagues are more inclined to self-promotion. They then just go into campaign mode and drift off course completely.”

(Grüne, f, west-medium)

Against this background, the councillors express their wishes with regard to local reporting. They think that journalism should be guided by the principle of objectivity and that reporting should be less sensational. In addition, less lurid wording

should be used and no politicians or parliamentary groups should be personally marginalised. The aim should be to reflect as many different positions as possible in the public discourse, to highlight issues in a differentiated manner and not to quote in a biased way. Basically, the councillors want journalistic work to be as neutral and objective as possible.

A local press that is oriented towards the aforementioned aspects may possibly even exert a positive influence on the quality of debate by making councillors feel safe to voice their opinions even when the press is present. The importance attached to the media illustrates once again that local politics cannot be regarded as a closed system – media as well as social discourses have an impact on the culture of discussion.

“One journalist always reported very well, in a very balanced way. She always looked at all sides and also let all sides have their say in her reports. That has a positive influence.”

(Linke, f, east-small)

Contextual factors for transgressions

The occurrence of transgressions is based on similar factors as the other dimensions of discussion culture. In most cases, however, the incidents have become more acute: For example, individuals who regularly transgress are in positions of power or are repeatedly not called to order.

In terms of political and thematic areas, emotionality and the potential for conflict intensify particularly when it comes to budgetary and financing issues, and especially in municipalities under great financial pressure. The distribution of funds (e.g. for the fire-fighting service) is the subject of particularly fierce disputes, and transgressions regularly occur. Especially in the east, it is evident that parliamentary groups with members from the AfD or right-wing populist parties often have larger majorities in the council and increasingly try to provoke attention through extreme behaviour.

What local council meetings with regular transgressions often have in common is a chairperson who does not adequately intervene and moderate conflicts. Occasionally it even happens that the chair of the meeting acts in a transgressive manner by personally attacking councillors. In this case, of course, moderation and mediation on the part of the chairperson is not possible.

When looking at the contextual factors for the occurrences of transgressions and comparing them with the other dimensions of the culture of discussion, it is noticeable that transgressions occur mostly where the other dimensions of the discussion culture are also largely and repeatedly disregarded. This means that by strengthening these dimensions, the culture of discussion can be improved and, at the same time, transgressions can be counteracted or handled better.

“We are an extremely pluralist society, which is a good thing, and this pluralism must be reflected. And that means arguing!”

Michel Friedman, publicist

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7. How has the style of discussion changed?

- › Overall, the councillors are observing a negative change in the culture of discussion within their municipal and local councils.
- › Frequently – and more notably in eastern Germany – the entry of the AfD into local parliaments is cited as a change, e.g. due to the increase in deliberate disruption of meetings or a general polarisation within the council.
- › Also independently of the AfD, polarisation within society is sometimes identified as a negative condition for change in the culture of discussion, which is revealed, for example, in polarising topics such as migration and climate.
- › Changes in council personnel can bring both positive and negative changes – depending on whether, for example, difficult or charismatic people leave or enter the council.

A culture of discussion is important for local politics, and there is currently room for improvement with regard to many aspects. But is this a new development and therefore a new phenomenon? Or has the quality of discussion in local and municipal councils remained the same in recent years? If there have been changes: To which (social) developments can they be attributed?

Most of the councillors interviewed have already been active in local politics for several legislative periods. This is often a life's work which is not given up so quickly, even in the face of obstacles. With such long experience, it is possible to understand to what extent there have been changes in the culture of discussion within the last few years.

The entry of the AfD into the political landscape

For the majority of respondents, negative changes in the culture of local political discussion have been noticeable over the last few years. In this context, a change in the party landscape due to the entry of the AfD into politics, which is said to have led to a deterioration, is often mentioned. In the previous chapter, we already traced the extent to which the AfD influences local political work and contributes to a polarised debate. The fact that this party is mentioned as an element of the deterioration of the culture of discussion can therefore come as no surprise. Particularly in eastern Germany, the entry of the AfD has evidently brought negative changes. This observation also coincides with the results on the question of contextual conditions (see chapter 6).

However, there are also counter-examples where the entry of the AfD into the council has hardly brought about any changes. For example, when the AfD behaved rather passively in council meetings or when the cooperation of the remaining parliamentary groups even improved as a result. This shows that in individual cases, right-wing populist parties in the council do not have to have negative consequences for the culture of discussion as perceived by the council members as a whole. The key here is to find a functional way of dealing with the AfD and between the other parliamentary groups, e.g. through increased solidarity and cooperation between the other parliamentary groups. Nevertheless, with regard to this study, it can be stated that the presence of the AfD in local politics tends to have a negative influence on the work of the council and thus also on the culture of discussion.

“The AfD is now on the council. They try to provoke wherever they can and take the old familiar stances. They make fake motions which they later declare to be mere satire. This is time lost for everyone.”

(Other, f, west-large)

“With the arrival of the AfD, things have indeed become more aggressive.”

(SPD, m, east-large)

“There was a change of mood in the municipal council because of the AfD. And the fact that you can't talk to an entire parliamentary group and work in an objective way is quite a change.”

(Other, m, east-large)

These findings are in line with the results of a study commissioned by DLF and SWR, in which the culture of discussion in the Stuttgart state parliament since the AfD entered the state parliament was examined. According to the study, not only has the content of the discussion shifted, but there has also been a marked increase in targeted provocations, heckling and insults.¹³ Other academic studies have also come to the conclusion that the AfD's entry into various state

parliaments and into the Bundestag has exacerbated the tone and created a more emotional and polarising mood.¹⁴

Social polarisation

In isolated cases, a polarisation of discussion behaviour is also noted, irrespective of party constellations. The rifts between the parliamentary groups and political camps have become deeper and more enduring. Whereas in the past people used to make up over a beer after a council meeting, nowadays disputes are no longer so easily resolved and continue to have an impact for a long time. Occasionally, a general polarisation of society or in the social media is held responsible for this. In this context, emotionally charged topics such as climate or migration are repeatedly mentioned as manifestations of social polarisation.

“Naturally, the quality of the debate is diminishing a little. At the same time, the ability to compromise or equally the willingness to compromise is also decreasing. If you have a difficult tone, then it is not possible to engage in discussing and thrashing out reasonable compromises.”

(CDU, f, east-medium)

In such cases, the deterioration in the culture of discussion is not an intrinsic problem of local politics. Polarisation also occurs in state and federal politics as well as in television debates and is noticed by local politicians. Therefore this trend ultimately also has an impact on local politics. With regard to this study, it can be stated that the phenomenon of polarisation also has an impact on the culture of local political discussion.

Personnel changes in the council

The study shows that individuals can significantly shape the culture of discussion in the council through their character and previous experience. Accordingly, this can lead to a negative development as part of a new composition of personnel resulting from a new term of office. The entry of previously inexperienced councillors increases the workload for meetings and committees, as the councillors are often still uncertain about processes, rules and procedures and need more training and support. Furthermore, the new

composition can change dynamics, which is why the working relationship can sometimes be bumpy to begin with.

“It also has to do with the new people on the council. Some of them ask a lot of questions and are not yet familiar with the processes and structures. As a result, the discussion culture here has changed a little for the worse.”

(SPD, f, west-medium)

“But I think change starts with the mayor. And I think that people discuss things a bit differently with each other. The old mayor was in office for 18 years, he knew everything inside out. And with the new people, the rookies, it takes time to get settled in a bit.”

(CDU, f, west-small)

Positive changes are attributed exclusively to personnel changes. The departure of councillors displaying transgressive or uncooperative behaviour, or the departure of mayors with little competence in chairing meetings, may well lead to improvements in the culture of discussion.

“Overall, the culture of conversation is a fundamental problem in politics. It is the same on a large scale as it is on a small scale. The way people talk to each other today is anything but desirable.”

(Other, f, east-small)

In summary, over the last few years, mainly negative developments can be observed in the culture of local political discussion. This underlines the pressing problems, because beyond these deteriorations, the councillors hardly note any improvements. In particular, there is a lack of structural approaches to improving the culture of discussion or to addressing the negative developments of recent years.

“We could also, instead of verbally lashing out at each other, first learn how to speak, to argue on the matter at hand in a manner that does not defame a person, but criticises a position.”

Bernhard Pörksen:
„Die Kunst des Miteinander Redens“,
 (“The Art of Talking to Each Other”), 2020

13 Thoms, K; Pfalzgraf, M. (2020): *Debattenkultur mit der AfD – Parlamentarische Provokationen* (*Debate Culture with the AfD – Parliamentary Provocations*). In: Deutschlandfunk.

Available online at: <https://www.deutschlandfunk.de/debattenkultur-mit-der-afd-parlamentarische-provokationen-100.html>

14 Heinze, A. (2020): *Zum schwierigen Umgang mit der AfD in den Parlamenten: Arbeitsweise, Reaktionen, Effekte*. (*On the difficulty of dealing with the AfD in parliaments: Working methods, reactions, effects.*) In: *Zeitschrift für Politikwissenschaft* 2021: 133–150, p. 145.

8. Strategies and possible solutions

- › For an improvement of the municipal discussion culture, all dimensions of the discussion culture should be brought into focus.
- › Training courses for the chairperson and the councillors are important building blocks.
- › Formal rules on speaking lists and speaking time in the internal regulations and a complementary code for a good discussion culture can have a positive effect by creating a common framework and initiating debate in the council.
- › Mediation and municipal conflict counselling can be used in particularly severe cases. At present, these instruments are scarcely available and little known.
- › A public broadcast of the meeting can have a positive or negative effect on the culture of discussion. In any event, it increases transparency and reduces participation obstacles for citizens.
- › A commendation for “good discussion culture” is rejected by the majority of the council members. However, some emphasised that it could have a motivating effect.

There is a need for the culture of discussion in local politics to be given renewed attention. According to the model of deliberation, it is essential in order to be able to make public-spirited and legitimate decisions. For the councillors themselves, a poor discussion culture is an additional burden.

The study makes it clear that the status quo – i.e. the individualisation and subjectivisation of discourse conflicts – is not a solution. Although none of the interviewees is considering giving up office, a poor culture of discussion – especially in combination with the working conditions in voluntary local political office – has a negative impact on

motivation and is also perceived as stressful. It should be borne in mind that this study cannot record how many people have already left local politics or did not enter it in the first place because of a negative tone in the council meetings.

What also became clear in the course of the interviews is that even if most of the interviewees attribute their problems to the behaviour of individual persons and apply individual solution strategies, the problem situations are similar. This can be explained by general, structural conditions for local politics such as the mandate as an honorary office, lack of time and lack of training in certain specialised areas or in the culture of discussion and conflict resolution.

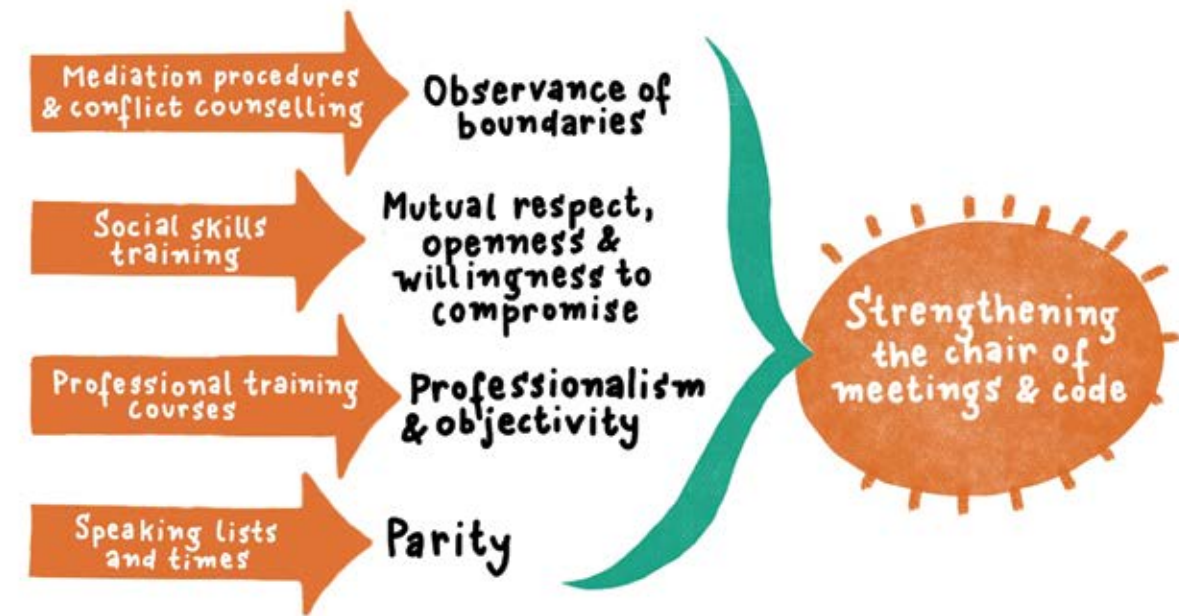


Figure 7 Strategies and possible solutions for improving the culture of discussion

This study emphasises that it is not individual but societal solutions that are needed. Against this backdrop, it aims to show the extent to which politics, society and civil society actors such as foundations can make a relevant contribution to improving the culture of discussion in local politics.

Therefore, the councillors were first asked openly about their own wishes and needs as well as ideas for strategies and measures to improve the culture of conversation. Subsequently, various proposals were discussed with the councillors. The aim was to find out which of the strategies and approaches were suitable and how they could be implemented in practice.

Strengthening the chair of the meeting

As described in chapter 6, the chair of the meeting exerts considerable influence on the orderly conduct of the meetings and the quality of the debates. The chair of the meeting thus represents the most important factor in improving the culture of discussion. How discussions proceed and whether conflicts are settled or nipped in the bud is largely

dependent on the communication skills of the chairperson. He or she is also responsible for the general observance of (informal) rules of discussion and for moderating the discussion. Suggestions for improving the culture of discussion must therefore also be addressed to the chair of the meeting.

In most cases, the mayor is in charge of the meeting, in some federal states people are elected specifically for this task.¹⁵ There is also no rotation of the chairperson in almost any municipal or local council. One point of criticism here, apart from the lack of influence on the chairing of the meeting, is the lack of neutrality, as the mayor usually belongs to a party or parliamentary group.

To address these issues, different options were proposed and discussed. Rotating the chair is seen by some councillors as a good idea that could bring more balance. (However, it is obvious that a lot of experience is lost in such a model, which is why the rotation system has been abandoned in other political areas in Germany). For some, a dual chair is also conceivable, in which the mayor is in

charge together with another person from the opposition. In this way, too, the affiliation of the chairperson to a party could be counterbalanced.

Calmness, assertiveness as well as competence and experience in resolving conflicts are desired from the chair of the meeting. The councillors state that it is important that the chairperson has communication and problem-solving skills on the one hand and is prepared to enforce the internal regulations and, if necessary, sanctions against disruptive or transgressive councillors on the other. Appropriate training can therefore be an important element in providing the chairperson with tools to lead the discussion and to defend the rules of discussion and the internal regulations in a firm and impartial manner.

The formation of tandems (experienced and new) is predominantly seen by the councillors as useful support for inexperienced chairpersons. In this way, competence and experience could be passed on.

“There are situations where I would like the mayor to intervene. After all, he is in charge of the meeting. So it’s not always the way you want it to be.”

(AfD, f, east-large)

“Obviously, the moderator has the biggest, direct influence on the culture of discussion. By steering the meeting in such a way that it doesn’t escalate and by also occasionally intervening in a disciplinary way. That naturally creates authority, which does happen in rare cases.”

(FDP, m, west-large)

Training for council members

In addition to training for those chairing meetings, councillors often request training for themselves on discussion culture, moderation skills and conflict resolution. Although there are courses, e.g. in rhetoric, some councillor bemoan the lack of training in the soft skills required for conducting discussions. Such training could compensate for the differing initial positions of volunteer local politicians.

However, it is questionable whether those councillors who are sometimes responsible for

disruptions and transgressions would accept this. Training of the chairpersons in dealing with conflicts is therefore all the more important. Even if this does not “discipline” the transgressors, it at least improves the way they are dealt with and provides support for those affected. Individual councillors can thus be empowered to address, moderate and – ideally – resolve conflicts.

“In our village, it’s really all groups across the board. No one has any training in, for example, how to discuss, how to talk, how to moderate – as is sometimes the case in companies.”

(FW, m, west-small)

“Well, of course there are these rhetoric courses. But in dealing with each other, perhaps also across factions, that is missing.”

(Grüne, f, west-medium)

Professional training could also bring about improvements. There is a municipal guide published by the working group of the municipal umbrella organisations, which contains the legal provisions for central thematic areas. However, in addition to this guide, external experts are desired who can personally convey the legal and technical basics in municipal policy practice (e.g. on construction measures, wind power). The training courses should not be a (time) burden, but should make it easier for the councillors to familiarise themselves with the topics. The aim here is therefore to present the relevant information in a concise and clear manner.

In the course of such cross-party training, an inter-factional or supra-regional exchange of experiences and competences can also be strengthened. Especially in personal processing, but also in dealing with transgressions or other dimensions of a poor discussion culture, networking and thus the establishment of supra-regional exchange and support structures can help. In this way, the councillors’ individual competence and ability to act can be strengthened structurally.

“No one reads through this thick municipal guide. They just have it handed to them and that’s it. But to be really trained, not by bored employees of the association of municipalities, but by a trained person who also says: ‘I’m proud that you’re doing voluntary work.’”

(CDU, f, west-small)

It is essential that the training can be combined with work and family life. Against this background, care should be taken to ensure that courses take place in the evening or at weekends and that the journey for councillors is as short as possible. In order to ensure neutrality, professionalism and equal access for all, training should be independent and cross-party, i.e. not only conducted by individual party organisations. In some cases, councillors also see this as an area of work for foundations. The expectation is that they could organise, conduct and finance the training.

The rulebook and a code for good discussion culture

All the councils covered by the study have internal regulations. These regulate the agenda and rules for speaking, such as procedures for interposed questions. In addition, they also provide for sanctions such as calls to order or exclusions. In general, they provide the chairperson with the opportunity to keep order. The internal regulations thus form the basis for chairing meetings. However, the way they are applied varies. Sometimes disruptions and transgressions are not sanctioned consistently. This may be due to the fact that the internal regulations are not generally known. Often, however, it is also due to a lack of assertiveness and competence on the part of the chairperson. At least the latter could be improved by the training already mentioned.

In addition, formal rules such as speaking times and speaking lists can be found in some internal regulations of medium and large municipalities, which help to structure meetings better. This has a positive effect on the overall length of meetings. In small municipalities, these formal rules are often missing from the internal regulations.

“It would be good to have clear rules about times. That is also an issue for us. Council meetings can sometimes go on until 11 pm. If I know my speaking time is limited, I try to focus on my core issues and not ramble.”

(FW, m, west-small)

The internal regulations and the rules contained in them could be adapted and expanded by the municipal council at the beginning of each term of office. If the members discuss and update the internal regulations at the beginning of each term of office and agree on a version, this could also promote recognition and awareness. Stimuli for this could come, for example, from the district, from the municipal umbrella organisations or from a foundation. In addition, information on speaking times and lists as well as sanction possibilities could also be included in the model internal regulations of the above-mentioned municipal guide.

None of the councils of the councillors interviewed had formal agreements on the conduct of discussions that go beyond speaking lists and times. Yet such agreements are certainly desired by some councillors. This reveals a clear omission. However, for many councillors, the internal regulations are not the right place to lay down rules on the culture of discussion. This is because the internal regulations are perceived as a set of rules with no room for interpretation. While agreements such as speaking time or meeting procedures are definable and open to interpretation and therefore fit well into the internal regulations, other “rules of etiquette” are seen as more problematic and subject to a great deal of room for interpretation. Therefore, a code can be a useful addition.

Accordingly, the councillors are mostly positive about the idea of a nationwide and cross-party code for the council. This could function as a guideline for the culture of discussion. However, some are sceptical about its applicability and doubt whether a code can do justice to the heterogeneous needs and circumstances of the respective councils. It could also be difficult to reach an understanding on the guidelines in the code, e.g. on aspects such as gender-equitable language.

It would therefore also be possible to develop a nationwide code as a blueprint, on the basis of which the councils would each draw up their own codes. In order to increase acceptance and

	Internal regulations ¹⁶	Code
Definition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> › Legal basis of municipal politics › Binding legal provision 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> › Self-conception/self-imposed agreement on rules governing the working relationship and the culture of discussion. › Based on self-defined values on behaviour and discussion culture = statement of values. › While guiding actions, it is not binding.
Content	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> › Formulation of basic rules and responsibilities. › Precise specifications are laid down in the internal regulations of the council. › The internal regulations are adopted at the constituent meeting for one election period. › They have no external effect and do not have to be officially announced. › In the event of violations of the internal regulations, this shall result in the measures taken being erroneous. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> › No personal attacks and insults, clear definition and demarcation between factual and personal criticism. › Basic rules of conduct, such as letting each other finish, listening and being polite to each other. › Openness to other positions and discussions at the factual level. › General tips to improve speech behaviour, e.g. slow, loud, clear speech. › No disruptions such as heckling.
Meaning & purpose	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> › Basically legally binding rules which the members can only partially determine themselves. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> › Improving the (informal) behaviour of members. › More precise and appropriate elaboration of rules and provisions than in the internal regulations.

Figure 8 Comparison of internal regulations and code for good discussion culture

bindingness, the municipality-specific code should be drawn up with the involvement of all council members. If possible, “troublemakers” should also participate in order to increase their acceptance. In principle, stimuli from outside (foundation, municipal association) are desirable. The key point is that the code is not imposed from above, but that

the councillors are encouraged in their own ability to act – especially as municipal politics is often already perceived as over-regulated. The code should rather be a guideline that facilitates the council’s work and is designed and communicated participatively by or with the council. Accompanying training for the assembly leadership and

Excursus: Code

A code is a statement of values that is not legally binding, but rather a voluntary commitment. It can contain recommendations for action and values for a good culture of discussion that serve as guidance for the councillors. Codes already exist in local politics – albeit more for the areas of sustainability and transparency. A prominent example of a code is the so-called Public Corporate Governance Code (PCGK), which can be translated as “guidelines for the good management of public companies”.¹⁷ A model text already exists for this, which should help municipalities to develop their own code. The code regulates the working relationship between the town council, the municipality and municipal enterprises. However, agreements on improving the culture of discussion in the municipal or local council are not included.

Another example is provided by the city of Mannheim. Its website documents a project called „Reform Gemeinde-ratsarbeit“ (Reform of local council work). Part of the project was agreements on how to run council meetings more effectively, including the development of a code of conduct.¹⁸

This demonstrates the possibility of increasing the quality of the council’s work, but also the culture of discussion, through the development and application of a code. Last but not least, a more effective and pleasant working atmosphere can be achieved, e.g. through an agreement on the better preparation of content or cooperation within the council.

councillors is also possible to further strengthen the acceptance, application and enforcement of a code.

In any event, the introduction of such a code may initiate a debate in which the council exchanges views on its culture of discussion.

“And in this respect, such a code could of course also be an opportunity to address the issue. And possibly to break it down to such situations in our own council, in our own municipal representation.”

(CDU, f, east-medium)

“The code would need to be implemented well and perhaps supplemented with training.”

(Grüne, f, west-medium)

Mediation procedures and municipal conflict counselling

Among the councillors, mediation procedures and municipal conflict counselling are hardly known or not used. There is frequently a lack of knowledge about where to turn in an emergency or that such support exists at all. In addition, there are reservations and perceived distances due to a lack of knowledge and experience. In addition, some councillors are unfamiliar with mediation and conflict counselling or do not consider it relevant for their own councils, as conflicts of this nature rarely occur.

However, there are exceptions: One councillor reports positively on the use of a mediator to improve the parliamentary group's discussion culture. It is interesting to note here that mediation was not sought out as a result of a heated conflict, but as a reaction to the new demands of the corona pandemic. Some people are aware of mediation being offered within the party. But most other councillors also consider mediation and municipal conflict counselling to be relevant in principle. It is considered good to be able to use such support in extreme cases – even if this has not yet been necessary.

In summary, the awareness of mediation services should be increased and the problems for which the conflict counselling centres provide support and what they can achieve should be made clear. A problem here could be that the term “mediation” is not a protected designation. This could be the starting point for certification, especially for the area of local politics.

Public broadcasting of meetings

Another idea to improve the culture of local political discussion is the public broadcasting of council meetings. The stance of the councillors is divided on this: About half see mainly positive, the other half more negative aspects.

For some, one argument against video broadcasting is that it promotes grandstanding and thus a confrontational tone, as well as lengthening speaking times because some would exploit the

media attention. Furthermore, there is the fear that the recordings are saved by third parties, such as parties like the AfD, and disseminated in an inappropriate context. This is because control over the dissemination of recordings of public meetings is not considered possible. Ultimately, this could lead to more cautious conversational behaviour and less open discussion.

In contrast, public broadcasting could also generate an improvement in the culture of discussion. Members would pay more attention to their tone and content and therefore be less provocative and argue more objectively and thoughtfully. In this scenario, the public functions as a regulating instrument for discussion behaviour.

“So the positive thing about it is that you'd better not indulge in any personal attacks or escalations if the meeting is open to the public. But it can also have negative consequences. Namely, substantive conflicts are no longer brought to the table because people don't want to debate in front of the camera.”

(SPD, m, west-small)

“A lot of people are afraid of parties like the AfD taking things out of context and then putting them on their own platforms and rehashing them in the media.”

(CDU, m, west-large)

In some municipalities, council meetings are already being broadcast; this applies to about half of the large municipalities represented in this study, a few medium-sized municipalities and none of the small ones. Councillors in whose councils meetings are publicly broadcast can see both the negative and positive effects. Overall, the impact on the culture of discussion was found to be relatively small, according to their accounts. However, the councillors with experience of video broadcasting have a positive attitude towards it on the whole – but for other reasons than positive effects on the quality of the debates. The opportunity for citizens to follow the meetings online is emphasised here. This could lower the barriers to participation and thus increase the transparency of political processes.

Other strategies and possible solutions

Another strategy discussed to improve the culture of discussion is a commendation for fair discussion, awarded for example to councillors who have undergone supervision in their debates. This strategy is rejected by the majority of councillors. The commendation is seen as “cosmetic” or a “fig leaf” that would not genuinely and sustainably improve the culture of discussion. Finally, the commendation presupposes supervision, during which councillors could consciously adjust their discussion behaviour. How a permanent, sustainable test can be guaranteed remains open. Some respondents argue that a commendation would provide a positive incentive to participate in supervision and could generate public pressure. The commenda-

tion could also serve as a seal of approval “to the outside world” and increase citizens' trust in the council. But even supporters question its practicality.

Other ideas concern the strengthening of a friendly and trusting cooperation, e.g. through joint events or informal, cross-faction women's meetings – although the high demands on time are viewed critically. Overall, networking and shared solidarity can be a good approach to talking about the culture of discussion and thereby to improving it in a common process.

An improvement in the cooperation between the council and the administration, e.g. in the exchange of information or the provision of information by the administration, is also mentioned.

15 In the municipalities of the following federal states, the chair of the assembly is legally transferred to the mayor: Baden-Württemberg, Bavaria, North Rhine-Westphalia, Rhineland-Palatinate, Saarland and Saxony. In Bremen and Thuringia, the chair of the assembly is defined by law in the same way, but the election of other persons is possible in principle.

In these federal states the chair of the assembly is determined by election: Brandenburg, Bremen, Hesse, Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania, Lower Saxony, Saxony-Anhalt, Bremerhaven, Berlin, Hamburg and Schleswig-Holstein.

16 Büchner, H. (2010): *Kommunalpolitischer Leitfaden. Band 1. Rechtliche Grundlagen kommunaler Selbstverwaltung. 2. Auflage. (Guide to Local Politics. Volume 1: Legal Foundations of Local Self-Government. 2nd edition.)* München: Hanns-Seidel-Stiftung e.V.

17 Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung: *Kommunal-Wiki. Public Corporate Governance Kodex.* Available online at: https://kommunalwiki.boell.de/index.php/Public_Corporate_Governance_Kodex

18 Stadt Mannheim (2009): *Ergebniszusammenfassung und Effekte des Change²-Projektes „Reform der Gemeinderatsarbeit“.* (Summary of results and effects of the Change² project “Reform of municipal council work”.)

Available online at: Microsoft PowerPoint – Zusammenfassung Ergebnisse_Ref. GR_ für Internet Akt. 25.6.09.ppt [Kompatibilitätsmodus] (mannheim.de)

9. Conclusion: More respect please!

Currently, a lot is being said and written about hatred, violence, insults and threats against local politicians. The culture of discussion in local political councils is less of an issue. The study has set itself the task of changing this. It should become clear how important the culture of local political discussion is and how important it is to find strategies and solutions to improve the culture of discussion.

It is true that transgressions in particular and the culture of discussion in general are not seen as the main problem in local politics. Nevertheless, in interaction with other factors, they can weaken motivation. Even a brief return to the widespread and widely accepted concept of deliberation underlines the importance of the culture of discussion in political negotiation processes.

If a councillor becomes the target of verbal abuse or the victim of unfair or improper discourse, he or she often sees it as his or her personal and sole task to change this. On the one hand, it is a matter of negotiating content in an appropriate and purposeful manner; on the other hand, it is important to conduct the discussions in such a way that new members of the council can also get involved and are not deterred. Only in this way can democracy in local politics be lived in an imaginative and attractive way for all. By improving the culture of discussion, the existing unequal gender

ratio can also be addressed. The representation of all citizens is particularly relevant in local politics as a pillar of democracy. Conversely, it is reasonable to assume that the culture of discussion would be different simply by having a stronger female presence in local politics.

The study shows points of reference for external stimuli to support the councillors – for example through a foundation. It is possible to develop and offer various strategies to improve the culture of discussion in local politics. This implies an increase in the selection of appropriate training courses and support in the conception of a code for good discussion culture. This study offers good starting points for the development of these strategies. At the same time, the visibility of the offers needs to be increased. Frequently, already existing resources such as mediation or specialised training are not known and therefore not used. All councillors, including long-standing members, should therefore be made aware of these services at least at the beginning of each legislative term. The constituent session of each legislative term can thus be used to provide the impetus for dealing with the topic of discussion culture.

There is no single solution to prevent, for example, defamatory and personal transgressions. Instead, consideration should be given to the improvement of the entire culture of discussion.

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Körper-Stiftung

Social development needs dialogue and understanding. Through our operational projects, in our networks and in conjunction with cooperation partners, we take on current social challenges in areas of activities comprising “Innovation”, “International Dialogue” and “Vibrant Civil Society”, as well as with “Cultural Impulses for Hamburg”.

Inaugurated in 1959 by the entrepreneur Kurt A. Körper, we are now actively involved in our own national and international projects and events. In particular, we feel a special bond to the city of Hamburg. Furthermore, we run an office in Berlin.

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Germany’s population is shrinking and ageing, while becoming more diverse at the same time. To prepare ourselves for this future, we forge new alliances between science, politics, civil society and the economy. We develop commitment networks and advocate more shared responsibility on the part of citizens. We campaign for a diversity of lifestyles in old age, and for successful models of integration.

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