



William Barton/Shutterstock



We believe in the free flow of information

Republish our articles for free, online or in print, under Creative Commons licence.

## The BBC is a partisan battleground – why does Japan’s public broadcaster escape the same fate?



Published: October 16, 2025 5.00pm BST

### Steven David Pickering

Honorary Professor, International Relations, Brunel University of London

### Martin Ejnar Hansen

Reader in Political Science, Brunel University of London

### Yosuke Sunahara

Professor, Kobe University

### DOI

<https://doi.org/10.64628/AB.73vnefyfe>

<https://theconversation.com/the-bbc-is-a-partisan-battleground-why-does-japans-public-broadcaster-escape-the-same-fate-266315>

Public service broadcasters are supposed to be the most trusted news outlets in democratic societies. Funded through models like licence fees and free from advertising, they are meant to stand apart from commercial media.

But our new study of trust in the BBC in the UK and NHK in Japan shows that reality is more complicated. Politics and ideology divide trust in public broadcasters in very different ways.

Like the BBC, NHK is a nationwide broadcaster with a mandate to serve the public interest and a fee-based funding model – making it a useful comparison. But there are differences: NHK’s budget is approved every year by parliament, and its style is often seen as cautious or technocratic. Unlike the BBC, it has not become a lightning rod for partisan battles.

In the UK, the BBC commands middling levels of trust overall, but those levels are deeply polarised. And the results of a recent survey reveal that the public is worried about political interference [in the BBC](#).

As part of our TrustTracker research, we asked people how much they trust the BBC on a scale from one (“not at all”) to seven (“completely”). [We ran this survey](#) every month for 19 months, from December 2022 to June 2024. We also asked them how they voted at the 2019 general election.

On that 1-7 scale, average trust in the BBC was 3.6. As far as political affiliation, the people most trusting of the BBC were Lib Dem voters, giving an average of 4.5 on the 1-7 scale. Next up were Labour voters, coming in around 3.9. Conservative voters were nearer 3.2, while people who voted for the Brexit party, the predecessor of Reform, averaged just 2.2.

This is a divide that we don't really see in Japan: there is much less polarisation around NHK than there is for the BBC.

In Japan, trust in NHK clusters in the mid-3s across the major parties. Supporters of the ruling Liberal Democratic party (LDP, centre-right) tend to rate NHK a little lower than average, while backers of the Constitutional Democratic party (CDP, centre-left) rate it slightly higher. Supporters of the Japan Innovation party (JIP, right-leaning) and the Japanese Communist party (JCP, left) fall in between, but the differences are modest.

In Japan, NHK isn't the partisan lightning rod that the BBC has become. Trust levels are modest and remarkably uniform, suggesting that while it may be seen as dull or technocratic, it is not a site of political polarisation.

## **Partisan battleground**

The UK's partisan divide around media becomes even more apparent when we look beyond the Beeb. Many people have [little trust in the news they read on social media](#). But people who voted for the Brexit party in 2019 trust the BBC even less than social media.

That tells us something important. The BBC has become the focal point for wider partisan scepticism about the media. [In our study](#), Conservative voters show lower trust than Labour or Lib Dem voters, but it is Brexit party supporters who are the most hostile, rating the BBC even less trustworthy than social media news.

This division has been baked in for years. When we look back to the 2016 referendum, Leave voters average about 3.0 on our BBC trust scale, compared with 4.1 among Remain voters. That gap highlights how Brexit now functions as a shorthand for a wider political divide in the UK, one that still shapes how people view certain issues, including the BBC.

The BBC has become a political lightning rod: rejected by anti-establishment voters on the right, and strongly embraced by liberal-centrist voters.

## Why the difference?

The contrast is not just about governance models or funding arrangements. The BBC's licence fee and NHK's parliamentary budget oversight play a role, but the bigger story is political culture.

In the UK, criticism of the BBC has become part of political identity on the right. Conservative politicians and sections of the press have long accused it of bias, not only in its coverage of Europe, immigration and culture, but also in its metropolitan outlook.

These debates escalated after Brexit, when the BBC came under fire from both Conservative MPs and the Brexit Party, which cast the broadcaster as out of touch with “ordinary people”.

The BBC is not simply one broadcaster among many; it has become a symbol around which partisan distrust gathers.

In Japan, NHK attracts none of this polarisation. Across supporters of all mainstream parties, trust in NHK sits at a broadly similar, middling level. Small anti-NHK protest parties exist, but they remain fringe. Mainstream parties have not made hostility to NHK a defining issue.



Trust levels in Japan's NHK broadcaster are modest yet steady across the political spectrum. Ned Snowman/Shutterstock

As a result, NHK is seen less as a political symbol and more as a technocratic background institution: rarely inspiring enthusiasm, but also not a target of partisan attack or polarisation.

One of the BBC's founding principles is that it needs to entertain. But this opens it to both loyalty and attack. Supporters value the passion it inspires, but this comes at the cost of deep political polarisation.

NHK, by contrast, avoids such extremes by being more technocratic. This also means it struggles to command the same public enthusiasm or cultural weight as the BBC. Whether broadcasters should aspire to one model or the other depends on whether stability or symbolism is more important in sustaining public trust.

At a time when misinformation spreads rapidly and public trust in institutions is under strain, public broadcasters are supposed to provide a shared ground of reliable information. Our findings suggest they still do, but in different ways.