

Why did we choose emotional democracy as the topic for our annual conference?

As societal tensions rise, emotions are increasingly at the forefront—shaping how conflicts emerge, escalate, and transform. Emotions can bring groups together, reinforce divisions, or fuel escalation. They are woven into every political decision, public debate, and civic action, making them a fundamental aspect of democratic life.

Despite their significance, emotions often receive less attention than they deserve in the public domain. They are often labeled as irrational, unprofessional, or disruptive—something to be minimized or 'managed'. Slowly but surely we are coming to understand that emotions cannot be bypassed: dismissing them as inconvenient aspects of our work limits our ability to engage with emotions **meaningfully**. As our conference host Zeineb Al-Itejawawi puts it: *"Emotions and rationality are not necessarily opposites. They need each other to foster rational, social, moral, and empathetic behavior."*

We are starting to see how emotions are at the basis of the way we perceive - and communicate about - the world. A **deeper understanding** of emotions is especially crucial in today's participatory forms of governance. When public officials, administrators, politicians, and citizens interact, they bring different emotional vocabularies – and a smooth translation between them is certainly not a given.

On November 7, 2024, the State of Conflict conference brought these groups together to explore the role of emotions in democratic processes. Organized by Public Mediation in collaboration with the University of Amsterdam's Conflict Resolution & Governance program, and hosted at the UvA University Library, the conference sought to understand emotions not as obstacles, but as essential to how people make sense of policies, institutions, and democracy itself.

We learned that emotions often emerge where people feel unheard, uncertain, or excluded. In these moments, emotions signal deeper values and needs. By treating emotions as **entry points** rather than disruptions, we can integrate them more effectively into policymaking, public processes, and conflict resolution. As Al-Itejawawi notes: *"Emotions are advocates of interests. They show what matters to people."* The conference invited participants to reframe emotions as catalysts for reflection, dialogue, and learning.

Thanks to our big team of workshop facilitators and rapporteurs, we have compiled this summary of ideas and insights that we carry forward as we collectively reflect on the 2024 edition of the State of Conflict conference.

Public Mediation & University of Amsterdam (CRG).

Contributors to the State of Conflict conference 2024

About the State of Conflict conference

The annual State of Conflict Conference is committed to the proposition that reflecting together in an open and critical way on the conflicts that engage us can produce useful insights about the challenges that our public, private, and civic institutions face. Conflict can provide a revealing perspective from which to view these challenges, particularly in a diverse society that is committed to democratic principles. The challenge of dealing with the differences in the grounded context of conflict can shed light on the potential for impasse and polarization, the risks this poses for sustaining social and political relationships, and the practical options for moving forward. It can also help us see how efforts to limit conflict—and thereby groups' ability to articulate grievances—can also undermine the health and resilience of democratic institutions and practices. It is in light of these overlapping challenges that we hope to develop insights into a very practical democratic question—how, not whether, to have conflicts.

Organizing team

UvA: David Laws, Martijn Dekker

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Thank you to everyone who contributed to this year's program!

Workshop facilitators

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Conference program and background information: www.public-mediation.nl/soc24/



Question 1: What are ways emotions arise in democratic practices?

In the next couple of pages, we reflect on the conference through five core questions. We start by asking ourselves: in what ways do emotions arise in democratic practices?

A phrase we heard a lot during the workshops was that ‘emotions signal **underlying needs** and values.’ In the words of public official and workshop facilitator Justus Vermeulen, emotions give meaning to events, *“they tell a story.”* This means that emotions offer valuable insights and can even *“deepen our understanding of a situation”* (Brunilda Pali).

In conflict situations, emotions emerge as people navigate complexity. As David Laws put it: *“Emotional responses are deeply tied to the issues at hand and require careful ‘management’ to foster meaningful conversations.”* Managing emotions clearly should not be about suppression: it is about creating the conditions for emotions to guide us into **transformative** moments.

As Christina Klubert noted, *“The main task for practitioners is to recognize emotions and use them as leverage to foster change.”*

One of the workshops on urban governance illustrated this dynamic. In the session, two civil servants recounted moments when anger and fear dominated public meetings—not necessarily due to policy content, but because residents felt excluded. One participant observed: *“When emotions are ignored, conflicts tend to escalate.”* The discussion reinforced the idea that emotions serve as **signals**—highlighting underlying issues that must be addressed before progress can be made.

“Emotions give meaning to events; they tell a story”

Question 2: How do emotions contribute to the work of academics, practitioners, and public officials?

Conference participants widely recognized emotions as integral to their work. They viewed them as both a potential as a challenge to their work. The effect of emotions depends not only on what is *expressed*, but also on how it is *received*. Especially in group dynamics that we encounter a lot working in the conflict field. For example, participants highlighted how emotions such as anger and hostility can initially be experienced as disruptive in a dialogue. However, when handled in a mindful way, these emotions may bring **genuine connection** and **engagement** by promoting deeper understanding.

Emotions reflect people's values and needs – therefore they are key to ensuring that democratic engagement remains meaningful. Emotional exchanges can therefore lead to genuine connections and better attunement to each other's feelings and experiences in dialogue. As Brunilda Pali noted, "*Emotions can contribute to healing and accountability, as well*

as democratic engagement. They can be drivers of change and justice."

Yet, if emotions are left unaddressed or manipulated, they can escalate conflicts or reinforce power imbalances. Unchecked anger or hostility may lead to breakdowns in communication, weakening democratic dialogue. Creating a space where emotions can be expressed without being exploited requires **reciprocal vulnerability** and intentional emotional engagement.

The difference between emotions as a contribution or a disruption often comes down to intent: Are emotions being expressed to foster understanding and **empathy**, or are they being used for strategic advantage? When approached with curiosity, openness, and respect, emotions strengthen democratic engagement; but engaging with emotions do require specific methods and practice from those involved.



Question 3: What action strategies help to engage with emotions?

Practitioners highlighted how emotions are a **critical aspect** of democratic practice and must be consciously engaged to harness their constructive energy. According to our participants, this involves preparation to receive and share emotions, as well as creating spaces where emotions can be expressed safely. In the eight workshops that were given at the conference, practitioners and researchers shared their knowledge and experiences with action **strategies** that can help to engage with emotions in our work.

Preparation and Improvisation: Facilitators must be prepared for emotionally charged situations. One practitioner described: *"You want to control [emotions], but it slips away from you. I felt misunderstood in the role I had as a facilitator."* (Justus Vermeulen). The analogy of a jazz improvisation was used to highlight the need for a repertoire and a structure while maintaining the freedom to adapt to the situation at hand. This form of 'prepared improvisation' allows practitioners to adapt dynamically while maintaining a framework for emotional engagement.

Transformative storytelling and visualization: Transformative storytelling was presented as a powerful tool. Through sharing stories and perspectives, transformative storytelling can lead to deepened understanding and connection between participants to a conversation. Visualization techniques, such as collective drawing, helps to conceptualize abstract ideas, allowing for both emotional engagement and holistic thinking. But also verbal techniques like the dialogue interview method, makes use of imagination and scenario-thinking as *"possible vital elements to loosen up emotional impasses or make tangible what's hard to express"* (Michelle Parlevliet).

Dramaturgy, Environmental and structural factors: Participants stressed the importance of dramaturgical elements in emotional engagement. *"Some emotions can be provoked through dramaturgy"* (christina), by scripting the interaction to create the right surroundings. The physical and logistical setup of a conversation significantly impacts emotional engagement. Faulty equipment or rigid seating arrangements can provoke frustration and hinder dialogue. For example, placing chairs in a circle promotes openness, whereas hierarchical setups (e.g., a speaker elevated above the audience) can stifle contributions. Breaking rigid structures, incorporating rituals, and creating informal settings establish *liminal spaces* where shared emotions and visions emerge. Multiple practitioners shared their experiences with such spaces. For example, Eva Wolf and Barbara Koole shared their experiences with drama labs where they created a space for citizens and civil servants to explore and discuss emotions and conflicts through all kinds of theatrical exercises.

Mindful Disarming: To deal with situations where emotional tensions escalate, the strategy of 'mindful disarming' was introduced: a method of using strategic yet genuine questions to de-escalate conflicts. A facilitator might ask: *"What would your community say if they were here?"* to shift a heated conversation toward more mutual understanding without manipulating emotions. Active listening and mindfulness techniques, such as body scans or focusing on shared humanity, were also highlighted as ways to regulate emotions and build empathy. By encouraging mutual vulnerability to strengthen human connections these techniques help ensure that emotions enhance democratic dialogue, not hinder it.

Question 4: What structural factors limit our ability to engage emotions in a productive way?

Despite practitioners' efforts to engage with emotions in their democratic practice, some structural constraints remain a significant challenge.

Role Constraints: Public officials must balance neutrality with emotional engagement. Demonstrating emotions can humanize interactions, but strict expectations around professionalism often discourage authentic expression. As Justus Vermeulen puts it: *"Being seen as a person rather than just a representative helps enormously."*

Balancing emotional expression with the role of a 'neutral representative' is a significant challenge for public officials. Demonstrating emotions can humanize interactions, but certain expectations often discourage authentic expression: *"Being seen more as a person than as a representative helps enormously"* one civil servant explained during the conference. Yet the requirement for neutrality, professionalism, and objectivity often limits authentic emotional engagement. This duality – being both a government representative and an empathetic human being – sometimes creates a tension that is difficult to resolve. It can be hard to balance own emotions, those of citizens, and those of colleagues at the same time, especially in very heated or crisis situations. *"Therefore, involving a 'third party placeholder' to create*

space for emotions might be necessary in these kinds of situations."

Power Dynamics: Power dynamics also play a critical role in limiting productive emotional engagement. Emotional asymmetry – where one party is overwhelmed while the other maintains control – can stifle dialogue. For example, in protests or heated discussions, officials may feel compelled to stay calm and composed, which can unintentionally alienate emotionally charged participants. This imbalance prevents emotions from being effectively addressed and integrated into the conversation. Hierarchies and structural inequalities exacerbate this issue, making it difficult to create safe and inclusive spaces for emotional expression.

Institutional and Procedural Limitations: Bureaucratic norms prioritize efficiency, solution-oriented discussions, and neutrality, leaving little space for emotional recognition. Formal agendas and rigid structures limit spontaneous, human-centered interactions, preventing emotions from being fully acknowledged or integrated into decision-making. Some participants argued that even mediation practices tend to bypass emotional recognition in favor of problem-solving approaches, which can undermine the emotional needs of participant.

"Emotions are advocates of interests. They show what matters to people."

Question 5: How do we continue our conversation on Emotional Democracy?

Emotions are both a challenge and an opportunity. When handled **thoughtfully**, they enrich dialogue, deepen understanding, and contribute to democratic engagement. Strategies such as mindful questioning and active listening ensure that emotions enhance, rather than obstruct, democratic processes. However, structural constraints—role expectations, power imbalances, and institutional rigidity—continue to challenge emotional engagement.

Addressing these challenges requires acknowledging the **complexity** of emotions, building spaces for emotional expression, and rethinking institutional practices to strengthen human connection in democratic processes.

We are looking forward to keep talking about emotions with our State of Conflict community. We definitely haven't finished **learning** about how to engage with emotions in our practice. Do you have any ideas on how to continue our conversation on 'emotional democracy'? Please be in touch.

In the meantime, we are working towards the 2025 edition of the State of Conflict conference. We hope to see you there.

Thank you for reading our 2024 report,

The organizing team.

