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Residents' Right to Be Rude Upheld by Massachusetts Supreme Court.

In an age of division, the court ruled that towns could not mandate polite discourse at public meetings. One official called the decision "very dispiriting."

In a decision that jangled the nerves of some elected officials, the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court last week reaffirmed a basic liberty established by the founding fathers: the right to be rude at public meetings.

The ruling sent waves of consternation across the state, where many local select board and school committee members have emerged battle-scarred from the coronavirus pandemic and its fierce disputes over masks, vaccines and remote learning. Stemming from a lawsuit filed against the town of Southborough, Mass., by a resident who said selectmen had silenced her unlawfully, the decision pushed back against attempts to mandate good manners.

"On its face it's very dispiriting," said Geoff Beckwith, executive director of the Massachusetts Municipal Association, which until last week had been nudging towns to develop civility guidelines for meetings. "Will it encourage the very few, very vocal individuals whose goal is to be disruptive? The S.J.C. is saying that's the price of true freedom of speech."

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The New York Times

By Jenna Russell

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