A bill moving through the legislature is generating a bit of buzz on social media, opening a new line of conversation among state lawmakers—and the public—about balancing the fundamental right to free speech and citizen interaction with elected officials via online platforms.

The bill, H.B. 6410, would establish a working group to study the issue of “online harassment” of municipal and state-elected officials and make recommendations on reporting guidelines for incidents as well as penalties.

There’s no doubt that online discourse surrounding politics and policy has taken a nosedive over the last decade. Oftentimes, elected officials find themselves the focus of criticism. It can be harsh. Consequently, there’s anecdotal evidence statewide that the number of people willing to serve in their communities in the capacity of a public official is dwindling.

It’s a problem that legislators who submitted this bill point to as their motivation. Residents concerned about the proposal, however, view it as a means for lawmakers to block criticism about their work.

The truth probably lies somewhere in between.

The legislation would create a working group that would include: law enforcement, designees from the offices of the attorney general and chief state’s attorney, a state representative, an unpaid municipal leader, an expert in social media company standards, and a professor with expertise in the first amendment. The group would be required to issue its report and recommendations to a legislative committee of cognizance by Feb. 1, 2024. A bill proposal could follow.

Lawmakers writing laws to protect themselves? What could go wrong?

The fear among opponents of this bill, and I don’t necessarily disagree, is that the panel’s nebulous charge will result in lawmakers defining online harassment in a broad manner that would see a comparatively benign criticism of their record or actions interpreted as a matter for police review.

The General Administration and Elections Committee advanced the controversial bill recently along party lines, with majority Democrats voting “yes.” At this point, it’s unclear whether it will be called for a House vote.

I don’t deny that there’s vitriolic behavior on social media, but I’m not sure more government regulation is the answer—particularly when we already have harassment laws on the book. To me, the solution to this societal issue can be found in the arena of personal responsibility rather than the halls of government.